“Beauty on Duty”: Constructions of Femininity and American Women’s Uniforms in World War II

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Challenge of Double Consciousness

In 1941, on the brink of the war, popular women’s magazine *Ladies’ Home Journal* implored its readers, “It’s your duty to look lovely.” The advertisements on the surrounding pages featured scores of beautiful, young women with flawless skin, coiffed hair, and bright smiles, their contribution to the growing war effort secondary to their display of prescriptive feminine beauty. Women who read this magazine, and many others, were confronted with two conflicting messages: the primary message this article sent was that it was women’s duty as women to be feminine and lovely. But, for the millions of women who held wartime jobs in the defense industry and enlisted in the new women’s military organizations, it was also their duty - as either a worker or soldier - to perform their patriotic jobs in defense of their nation. These jobs had traditionally belonged to men and as such required women to adopt what society considered “masculine” qualities: strength, bravery, confidence, and assertiveness. Holding these two conflicting identities at once fostered a burden of double consciousness for many women.

Double consciousness is a term used by scholars of women’s history to describe the duality of consciousness held by women when they entered the public sphere and struggled to balance their identity as women, as defined by the norms of traditional womanhood, and their professional identities. A prominent example is women lawyers in the late nineteenth century, who entered what was an almost exclusively masculine occupation at the time. The process of negotiating between these two identities was often played out in women’s clothing and appearance. During World War II, a similar
negotiation can be seen in women’s apparel in the military and the defense industry. Women’s military and industrial uniforms form an excellent lens for examining the struggle between masculine and feminine identities in the workplace.

The obstacles women faced in the male-dominated fields of the military and the defense industry were often handled through the alteration of women’s appearance and presentation. Uniforms played a key role in that negotiation because they were dictated by predominantly male authorities, either the U.S. government or industry leaders. These male authority figures had an unprecedented amount of power over what women were going to wear in wartime, from the design of their uniforms to the level of stringency in uniform enforcement. It mattered a great deal to the government and to the defense industry what women would be wearing to work day in and day out, because these women were on display like never before.

Uniforms were a staple of everyday life in America during World War II. As the country mobilized for war, young men and women donned the uniforms of their nation for military service, war plant jobs, civilian defense organizations, and more. Suddenly, the streets were filled with people in uniforms of all kinds, but some garnered more attention than others. Women in uniform, while not an entirely foreign concept to the American public, were still a novelty. Particularly, women in military uniforms and women in slacks caused a great deal of neck-craning and whispers when they walked down the streets of big cities and industrial boom towns. The uniforms were novel to the women who wore them as well, and had a significant impact on the ways in which they viewed themselves and interacted with others.
Uniforms, unlike other types of apparel, are endowed with a certain significance. They announce publicly that the person wearing the uniform has a specific role to play in society. According to Hermann Broch, the Austrian writer who was part of the famed Modernist movement of the 20th century, a uniform provides its wearer with “a definitive line of demarcation between his person and the world.” Only certain people are permitted or required to wear uniforms, so the simple act of wearing one automatically sets the wearer apart from the rest of society. Uniforms can also act as indicators of status: for instance, in times of economic hardship, a uniform denotes that the person has a job while many others may not. Finally, a uniform indicates that one is part of something greater than the individual, whether that be something as large as the U.S. military or as a small as a sports team. A uniform bestows upon its wearer an identity connected to a greater goal or ideal, and thus it gives the wearer power in the public sphere. For these reasons, uniforms became a critical part of many women’s lives during World War II and are essential to understanding the complex – and often contradictory – roles women played in the war effort.

Women had contributed to the war effort during World War I, but during the Second World War women’s participation increased exponentially. During the First World War, the Navy employed approximately 13,000 women as “Yeomen (F)” who performed primarily clerical work. Of course, women had been participating in war for hundreds of years as nurses, but they had never been fully incorporated into the U.S. military or given the discipline and benefits of male soldiers. Whereas in World War I only a few thousand women served the military, in World War II over 350,000 women joined the newly-formed women’s military organizations. The creation of these organizations in the Army, Navy,
Coast Guard, and Marine Corps marked the first time women were truly a part of the U.S. military on a large scale. No longer were these women just civilians working for the military - they themselves were militarized. However, the transition from a previously all-male military to one that included hundreds of thousands of females was not seamless. The women’s corps confronted opposition from the government, the public, and from the military itself. In order to prove themselves in the arena of war, women had to adopt some masculine qualities. But, they also had to remain appropriately feminine to avoid censure for overstepping gender boundaries. The challenge of double consciousness and women’s responses to it will be explored further in Chapter 1.

Women’s participation in the defense industry also increased dramatically during World War II. Women had worked in the defense industry in relatively small numbers during World War I, but their numbers exploded in the early 1940s in response to the rapidly increasing demand for war materials such as planes, ships, and ammunition. With men enlisting or being conscripted into duty to protect their country, women by the millions were called to replace them on factory lines. “Do a man’s work for a man’s pay!” and “Free a man to fight!” became the battle cries of American industry and government as they attempted to coax women out of the home and onto the factory floor. Many women jumped at the opportunity to assist the war effort, bring their loved ones home sooner, and make good money in the process. But they faced a great deal of opposition from the public, from male factory workers, and most significantly from the men in their own lives. Similar to women in the military, women war workers confronted double consciousness while working to strike the delicate balance between masculinity and femininity to prove
themselves capable of doing the job while remaining feminine. I will explore this further in Chapter 2.

Although women continued to work outside the home in ever-increasing numbers after the war, this did not indicate the death of the dilemma of double consciousness. In the postwar years, conflict between gender identity and professional identity continued to be a burden many women struggled under. Women did not exit from masculine workplaces entirely, and those who remained there struggled even more than they had during the war years. The pervasiveness of the 1950s “cult of domesticity” contradicted women’s economic need to work and made double consciousness an even more potent problem. Women who left the workplace to become housewives also suffered from identity conflict, but of a different kind. Betty Friedan’s groundbreaking book *The Feminine Mystique*, released in 1963, elucidates their struggle. Calling it “the problem that has no name,” Friedan described the precarious situation that many midcentury women found themselves in: pressed into a mold they did not fit, trapped inside the cage of the home, and wondering why they did not feel as happy and content as all the magazines told them they would. Friedan gave a voice to what women had been feeling for years, especially women who had held a double identity as women soldiers and ordnance workers during World War II. The challenges of balancing this double identity changed for women in the postwar years, which I will discuss further in Chapter 3.

**Literature Review**

On the surface, World War II appears to be a time of rapid advancement for women. Popular opinion today tends to lean in this direction, painting the war years as a
progressive period and using the image of Rosie the Riveter as a quasi-feminist icon. When looked at in isolation, wartime America seemed to take several steps in the direction of gender equality. In the first two years of war, women’s employment outside the home increased from 12 to 18.2 million. These changes were especially seen in the defense industry, where the number of women working rose 460%. Along with the military and the defense industry, women’s presence in government work, civilian defense organizations, on farms, and in almost every area of society increased as women stepped in to fill men’s places when they left to fight the war. All of a sudden, women seemed to be taking over the public sphere, a domain that traditionally belonged to men. Women, called by the government, the media, and industry leaders to perform their patriotic duty, stepped out of their traditional domestic realm into a world dominated by maleness. Although women had been working outside the home for decades, during the wartime era women were vigorously recruited and encouraged, more than ever before, to leave the home to take jobs - and they did so by the millions. More married women were working outside the home, defying the traditional role of women as homemakers. In the media, women were often exalted for portraying masculine qualities like strength with the image of Rosie the Riveter and many others. “Womanpower” was the word of the day, and it seemed that it was America’s women who kept the nation going during the war.

But just beneath the surface, there is a more complex story to be told. Many scholars have argued that World War II marked only a temporary change in the status of women, and when looked at in the context of the postwar period, was actually a time of stagnation for women and reinforcement of traditional gender roles. In the 1970s, under the influence of second-wave feminism, historians claimed that continuity, rather than
progress, was the more significant outcome of the war years. Lisa Anderson and Sheila Tobias contested that public, as well as private, discrimination against women in the postwar period led to the failure of any wartime gains. Leila Rupp, in her study of wartime propaganda, stressed ideological continuity in images of women which supported, rather than challenged, the traditional role of women. More recent scholars have continued this ideological trend. Sociologist Tawnya J. Adkins Covert, in her study of women’s magazine advertising during the war, agreed that wartime images remained consistent with traditional images of women. Adkins Covert contends that gender scripts changed only temporarily during the war to accommodate wartime labor needs, but reverted to pre-war standards once the war was won.

Most of the existing literature on women in World War II at least mentions uniforms, but often as an afterthought. In my opinion, scholars cannot look at the experiences of women during the war years without critically examining what they were wearing and how they were presenting themselves to the public. As is often quoted, the personal is political. How people, particularly women, choose to cover their bodies is rarely just a practical decision. Women, whose beauty has been used as a barometer for their worth for centuries, have their appearances scrutinized daily. The ways in which women dress and present themselves to the world are charged with political and social meanings. In times of strife like World War II, scrutiny of women is often heightened, and this includes scrutiny of their appearance. Historian Melissa McEuen stands out for her focus on women’s appearance and presentation in wartime. In Making War, Making Women: Femininity and Duty on the American Home Front, McEuen takes a holistic approach to the issues of women’s presentation, examining body ideals, personal hygiene, and civilian fashion,
along with cosmetics and uniforms, in her examination of the female body at war. Her work is extensively quoted in my paper because it is the most in-depth account of women’s appearance during World War II I have found, and supports my argument that uniforms were a nexus between femininity and women’s workplace experiences. Because my study is focused specifically on uniforms, I am able to delve deeper into that particular subject that McEuen did in her work and gain new understandings of how uniformity affected women during the war.

In my thesis, I argue that both the popular and scholarly interpretations of the wartime era are correct in some ways and incorrect in others. The advances women made in integrating the sex-segregated job market, obtaining equal pay for equal work, and challenging conventional ideas of femininity were mostly temporary. The sex-segregated job market was firmly reestablished after the war as women were unceremoniously pushed out of the male jobs they had held during the war. The temporary nature of their work had been emphasized over and over again during the war from the government, industry leaders, and the media. It was made clear that women were expected to step up and fill in for men “for the duration,” and not a minute longer. Women were asked to fill in for men, but not to identify with the traditionally male worlds they occupied. Their motivation for taking on these roles was supposed to be “devotion to their nation’s war effort, not the establishment of their own permanent presence in roles that had previously been closed to them.” Women donned men’s clothes and took men’s jobs, their bodies used as literal placeholders until men returned, upon which everyone was to return to his or her “proper” place as if nothing had changed. But women’s lives had, in fact, changed
significantly during the war, and some of these changes could not be as easily erased as others.

While many of the gains women made towards equality during World War II were lost in the postwar period, some remained. Slacks would become a staple in the everyday woman’s casual wardrobe in the decades following the war, and even more acceptable for women in public in the latter half of the twentieth century. Today, the idea of a woman wearing slacks to work causes no alarm. And though the number of women employed after the war did initially decrease from its wartime high, it never dipped back down to prewar levels and quickly rose higher than ever before. The mass migration back to the home in the immediate aftermath of the war seems dramatic, but it did not mark a permanent reversal to prewar numbers of women working outside the home. Particularly, the number of married women working outside the home continued to grow after the war. This was influenced less by ideas about women’s equality and more by the rampant consumer culture of the postwar era. As Karen Anderson noted, “The good life was expensive and women had to contribute to their share.” A single-income household was no longer sufficient for many American families if they wanted to partake in the consumer culture of postwar abundance. Of course, for many more families outside the middle class, a single income had never been sufficient and women continued to work by necessity. Though women had proven themselves adept workers during the war, it would take another feminist movement in the 1960s to cement their right to work on an equal basis with men.

**Methodology**
The majority of my research was done using archival material in the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, and at the Tisch Library at Tufts University. My first step was to examine the collection of World War II pamphlets at the Schlesinger Library, which included military, civilian, and defense industry ephemera. From there, I dissected the personal collections of several women who lived or worked during the wartime era. Most of these collections included a scrapbook and personal papers. I read a large collection of WAVES newsletters in the papers of Jane Barton, which were a key addition to my research. The collections of Katherine M. Keene and Hazel Hitson Weidman also contained their uniforms from the WACs and WAVES respectively, which I was able to examine firsthand. I also made use of Tisch Library and several others libraries through Interlibrary Loan to read relevant books from the war years, including several published memoirs of women who worked in industry or served in the military during the war. The most significant of those were Angel of the Navy by Joan Angel, One Woman’s Army by Charity Adams, Hit the Rivet Sister by Ann Pendleton, and Slacks and Calluses: Our Summer in a Bomber Factory by Constance Bowman and C.M. Allen.

Periodicals are another crucial source of evidence I used to support my arguments. The Schlesinger Library holds an archive of the Ladies’ Home Journal on microfiche; through Tisch Library, I was able to view the archives of The New York Times, Vogue, and TIME magazine, which were invaluable resources for learning about media depictions of women during the war. The media had exploded in the period between the World Wars. Newspapers, magazines, movies, and radio became integral parts of the daily lives of the American people, and as such were also integral to the war effort. The
media took a particular fancy to the women’s military organizations and to female ordnance workers during the war, and the public’s fascination with these women seemed to continue unabated throughout the war years. In every piece of print material I examined from 1941 to 1947, I never failed to find at least one mention of women in the military or industry, from tiny snapshots, to front-page stories, to entire issues dedicated to women’s contributions to the war effort. Pictures of these women were ubiquitous, from the iconic image of Rosie the Riveter to the numerous recruitment posters put out by every branch of the military. How they were presented publicly was crucial to maintaining the gender boundaries that authority figures deemed essential to the foundation of American society. The government and industry leaders had to find ways to strike a balance between masculinity and femininity in the uniforms they prescribed to women, and women themselves continued the struggle to find this balance with whatever control they had over their appearance. Attire designated as feminine “could help keep sexuality safely circumscribed”. As more women took on men’s jobs and occupied men’s spaces, “how they chose to cover their flesh mattered more than ever.”

The medium I chose to explore for my thesis was print, particularly newspapers and magazines that had wide readership, both male and female. I chose to focus specifically on The New York Times, TIME, and The Ladies’ Home Journal from 1941 to 1947 for my media primary source material. The first two publications represented a more general readership and a focus on news as well as lifestyle stories; the third was targeted towards women (specifically white, middle-class women) and focused almost exclusively on lifestyle stories. All three publications were run by men during the war, but employed a large number of female writers. Women writers, especially for large newspapers like
The New York Times, were often assigned to write about topics considered “women’s interest,” such as beauty, fashion, and – during World War II – women in the military and industry. These topics were rarely covered by male writers, possibly because of beliefs on the part of the men running the publications that “women’s interest” stories were better covered by women, or that they were less important and therefore beneath male writers. Because of this dichotomy between female writers and their male superiors, gender tensions were often played out in the articles I discuss. As often as possible, I noted the name of the writer whose article I use as evidence in my paper. For some articles and some publications (particularly *Time*), author names were not available. Even in those cases, gender is still a present and potent force when considering who the intended reader was and who was in charge of running the magazine.

I supplemented my archival research with extensive secondary source research, some of which has been briefly covered above in the Literature Review. In addition to those historians whom I mentioned, I read widely within the topics of women’s history, World War II history, labor history, feminist history, and military history. All of these sources are noted in my Bibliography.

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v McEuen, *Making War, Making Women*, 36


xi Campbell, *Women at War with America*, 8


xv McEuen, *Making War, Making Women*, 156
II. CHAPTER 1: WOMEN IN THE MILITARY

“As long as we did the job well and we did not interfere with or challenge the maleness of the military, things would go along with surface smoothness.”

In the introductory book *The Waacs*, published in 1943, women who wished to enlist in the Women’s Army Corps were cautioned: “Remember that you are still a woman and your real job is to remain a woman, first, last, and always, even in khaki.” Statements like this one were repeated over and over again to women in the armed forces. They were taught in training to dress and behave in a military manner and to perform their duties for their country to the best of their ability. But in messages from the government and the media, they were also told to retain their feminine charms by conforming to conventional beauty standards and body ideals. They were told to never forget that their biologically-determined role as mother and their socially-ordained role as wife and homemaker were always more important than whatever work they were doing at the moment. This conflict between a woman’s identity as a soldier in the U.S. military, committed to protecting her country, and her identity as woman, destined for domesticity and matrimony, fostered a sense of double consciousness in many women’s minds. The challenge of balancing opposing roles as both “woman” and “soldier” was not unique to servicewomen in World War II. The dilemma of double consciousness has plagued women from their entrance into the public arena in the nineteenth century. Women lawyers, for example, had to balance the demands of their two roles by embodying traditional femininity and at the same time displaying the conventionally masculine qualities required of their law work. Women entering traditionally male professions like business, medicine, and politics in the
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also fell victim to the burden of double consciousness.

As women struggled to find ways to house both identities simultaneously, their struggle often manifested itself in the ways they presented themselves, both publicly and privately. The dilemma of double consciousness required women to show, through their clothing and physical appearance, how they balanced femininity with professional identity. However, under the strict regulations of military uniform, there was little women themselves could do independently to create that balance. The government and the media (under the strict guidance of the government) recognized that women’s two identities were in conflict with one another and, in order for women to be successfully integrated into the military, some negotiating had to be done between the two. The battleground of this negotiation was women’s faces and bodies.

Uniforms form an excellent lens for examining the ideological goals of the government and the media in alleviating the burden of double consciousness on women. Since uniform designs must be approved by the highest levels of military command before being dispensed to all members of the military, the messages the government wanted to send about enlisted women can be read in the uniforms they assigned to those women. Women’s uniforms from all branches of the military followed the same basic formula - jacket, skirt, shirt, and hat - and conformed to current fashion norms and wartime fabric regulations. The military woman’s uniform was similar in cut, style, and fabric to a dress suit she would wear in civilian life, but with the added accoutrements of military apparel (brass buttons, insignia, etc.). This was a conscious decision on the part of the government to fashion military women as slightly elevated versions of their civilian selves,
rather than making them look like military men. While women’s uniforms reflected some distinct elements of men’s military clothing, they still embodied femininity by keeping women in skirts.

While Army and Navy nurses were a part of the military, the different treatment they received illuminates the issue of public perception of women working in a masculine field. Although military nurses encountered some similar problems to their enlisted sisters, public perception of nurses and their actual lived experiences were drastically different. Even though nurses wore the same uniforms as their counterparts in the Army and Navy, they were seen as more feminine because of the history nursing possessed. Nursing was tied to the domestic sphere and the traditional role of women as caretakers, and had been viewed as a feminine occupation for a century before World War II. Women had participated as nurses in all the wars in American history, going back to the American Revolution. Recruitment literature for the Army and Navy Nurse Corps (as well as the Cadet Nurse Corps, a new development during World War II) built upon this history of nursing as a feminine occupation and used imagery of domesticity to entice recruits. One pamphlet advertising the Cadet Nurse Corps stated, “To study nursing is to make one of the best possible preparations for successful living. Nurses make excellent wives and mothers, capable homemakers, competent leaders in their communities.” The pamphlet also made sure to note that the marriage rate among nurses was “unusually high.” Nursing was seen as an excellent preparation for marriage and home life, and posed little threat to the masculinity of the military, so it was more acceptable to both women and men than enlistment in the women’s military organizations, where domestic ties were more tenuous.
However, there was a great paradox in the situation of military nurses between their perceived role and their actual role during the war. Though the nurse’s position was viewed as more feminine than that of the enlisted woman, in reality nurses occupied the most “masculine” role of all women in the military. They were the closest women to the dangerous front lines of battle, serving in both the Pacific and European theaters. Many nurses were captured by Japanese soldiers at Bataan and made prisoners of war.\textsuperscript{vi} On the home front, nurses exercised an unprecedented amount of power over the male hospital corpsmen they trained. The system of female nurses training male corpsmen maintained male supremacy in theory, “for the medical services were almost always under the command of the male officer-physicians who never doubted the continuity of civilian doctor-nurse relationships.” But in practice, the system represented “a spectacular role reversal quite remarkable in the annals of male-female relationships. Tens of thousands of women were formally and practically in charge of hundreds of thousands of men, none of whom could reasonably aspire to equal status for the duration.”\textsuperscript{vii} The elevated status of female nurses was not recognized at all by the media, especially in comparison with their counterparts in the WAC and WAVES. While nurses were often commended for serving bravely while maintaining a feminine image, women soldiers and sailors were constantly under suspicion because their jobs were seen as rightfully belonging to men. In reality, WACs and WAVES were mostly employed in traditionally female jobs like clerical work, and it was the nurses who exercised real power in their positions.\textsuperscript{viii}

Though enlisted women individually occupied hundreds of different jobs, overall they were mostly assigned to clerical work, not very different from the jobs they would
perform in civilian life.\textsuperscript{ix} This was both a practical decision – male soldiers who had been occupied with clerical duties could be better used, in the eyes of the government, on the battlefield – and a strategic decision. Clerical work was viewed as a more feminine occupation within the broader masculine military sphere. By keeping women occupied in similar jobs to what they would perform in civilian life, the military not only filled a real need but also mitigated the gender threat women posed to the hyper-masculine military.

The media also played a critical role in alleviating the gender threat of the woman soldier. The government was able to control media depictions of military women, to an extent, in order to convey their own messages about those women: namely, that they were still feminine despite their military affiliation. References to the Women’s Army Corps, for example, had to go through the War Department Bureau of Public Relations “for review prior to its release,” a stipulation not required of the regular male Army.\textsuperscript{x} However, the government’s control only extended so far. Countless stories and pictures about the women’s military ran in newspapers and magazines across the country every day. The media’s fascination with women’s military organizations took a turn for the worse when a rumor campaign about servicewomen’s sexuality damaged recruitment efforts. The backlash against the women’s services, primarily by men, revealed the potency of the threat military women posed to the gender status quo.

\textsuperscript{i} Earley, Charity Adams. \textit{One Woman’s Army: A Black Officer Remembers the WAC}. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1989, 186.
\textsuperscript{iv} Ibid., 93
\textsuperscript{v} “Enlist in a Proud Profession: Train as a Nurse!” U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps, Box 2, Folder 66, Women in World War II Pamphlets, Vault 940.53, W87p. Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Ibid., 61

Ibid., 19

Women’s Public Presentation: The Soldier’s Uniform

One of the U.S. military’s greatest home front challenges was to make women into soldiers while at the same time reassuring a nervous public that “woman” as an idea “remained clearly distinct from ‘soldier’.” The military’s approach to this challenge was to manipulate the way women presented themselves to the public. It was easy for the military to control women’s public presentation because all members of the military were required to wear their uniforms, issued by the government, whenever they were in public or in the company of more than two people. Thus, the government had an unprecedented level of control over what women wore, all the way down to their stockings, underwear, and girdles. Government control over uniform design across all the military branches revealed the importance of cultivating the proper image for military women.

Women had great pride in their uniforms and the military organization to which they belonged. Uniforms boosted women’s confidence and feelings of importance and independence, which were dangerously masculine traits. Thus, it was important to temper the power of the uniform and of the woman who wore it with traditionally feminine or domestic language, images, and ideas. Joan Angel, in her memoirs about her service in the women’s branch of the Navy (WAVES), recalled her first time trying on her uniform: “I looked at myself in the long mirror. By heavens, I did look impressive! The suit was beautifully cut, trim and efficient-looking without being stiff and masculine. It was the kind of tailored outfit I might have bought in civilian life - but in navy blue, with the fouled-anchor embroidery on the collar and black regulation buttons, it gave me the bearing of a woman in whom great responsibilities were vested. Unconsciously, I straightened and got
a look of fire in my eyes.” Helen Edgar recalled of the WAVES uniforms, “They made us feel worthy and like really distinguished women… They made us stand better, walk better and feel prouder.” Nancy Shea, in an introductory book for Women’s Army Corps (WAC) recruits, said of women’s pride in their uniforms, “It is deeper than vanity, bigger than femininity, and mightier than individualism. It is esprit de corps.” This esprit de corps tied women to their military organization and instilled in them a sense of comradeship with the men who wore the uniform of the same organization. However, this comradeship through uniformity had constraints placed on it, and women’s uniforms were made distinct from men’s in gendered ways.

In order to establish a feminine image of the woman soldier, the leaders of the new women’s military organizations made the decision to adopt skirts instead of slacks in their new uniforms. Slacks were briefly considered for their practicality, but skirts were decided upon as more “ladylike.” According to historian Doris Weatherford, the government’s decision to prioritize femininity over functionality by choosing skirts over slacks showed “totally illogical reasoning.” However, military leaders had very real reasons for making this decision. Oveta Culp Hobby, the head of the WAC, “desired that women wear skirts instead of slacks wherever possible, to avoid a rough or masculine appearance which would cause unfavorable public comment.” It was important to the government, up to the highest levels, that women still appeared “ladylike” while in military service, because they were already pushing a boundary into the extremely masculine domain of the military. Skirts served the function of balancing the “military” with the “feminine” to keep gender roles safely circumscribed, thereby assuaging public fears and hopefully avoiding backlash. Skirts also emphasized gender difference in the workplace, clearly delineating
male soldiers from female soldiers. When women were appropriately feminine, the government hoped, they would not pose a threat to gender roles. The recruitment literature of all four women’s branches of the military – WAC (Women’s Army Corps), WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, the women’s Naval reserve), SPARS (Semper Paratus Always Ready, the Coast Guard women’s reserve), and USMCWR (U.S. Marine Corps Women’s Reserve) - had a strong focus on the way women would look in uniform. The emphasis on stylish, fashionable uniforms with couture designs served a dual purpose: to boost recruitment (because the men in charge believed women would be enticed to enlist by a nice uniform) and to keep sexuality safety circumscribed by couching military service in terms of an acceptably feminine preoccupation with fashion. Recruitment pamphlets used fashion design terms liberally, which the writers assumed would be familiar to the women whom they were targeting and would resonate with them. Many of these recruitment pamphlets read more like advertisements for a fashion show than patriotic inducements to volunteer for military service. One USMCWR pamphlet was even entitled “It’s the Vogue,” evoking the popular women’s high-fashion magazine. This type of recruitment was unprecedented: pamphlets directed towards men rarely talked at length about uniforms, except to highlight the bravery, glory, and proud profession that the uniform symbolized. Meanwhile, pamphlets for women waxed poetic for pages upon pages about their fashionable uniforms.

Even when encouraging women to see themselves as part of the military, the greater emphasis was on preserving their femininity. In the recruitment literature for the USMCWR, the government’s attempts to strike a balance between women as soldiers and women as feminine fashion plates is glaringly obvious. Uniforms, “both stylish and
practical” were described as variations of the men’s uniforms, “encouraging women to think of themselves as actual Marines.” However, details about the fashionable aspects of the uniform and their figure-flattering fit were included in women’s recruitment brochures to “entice women volunteers who wished to look stylishly feminine,” something that was never done for male Marines. The USMCWR pamphlet “It’s the Vogue” used fashion design as a motif throughout. A section of the pamphlet called “Fashioning the Marine” reads, “A fashion designer takes good cloth…and tailors a superb gown…The Marine Corps takes outstanding women…and fashions them into Marines - military women of distinction.” Here, women are likened to gowns, which commodifies and objectifies them. Other sections featured titles like “The Marine Mode” and “The New Vogue” alongside images of fashion models posing in Marine uniforms. The USMCWR also had a strong focus on cosmetics in their recruitment literature. The red piping on their uniforms was to be matched perfectly with their lipstick – Elizabeth Arden even created a shade called “Montezuma Red” specially for the USMCWR for this purpose.

The most obvious “haute couture” marketing angle in all the women’s corps was the presentation of the WAVES uniform in their recruitment literature. Designed by the famous couture designer Mainbocher, the uniforms – and their designer name – were often the highlight of recruitment brochures for the women’s Naval reserve and the Coast Guard women’s reserve (SPARS), who shared the WAVES uniform apart from their insignia. Several WAVES recruitment pamphlets named Mainbocher as a “famous stylist” and indicated that he designed the uniforms “especially” for the WAVES, lending the uniforms an air of exclusivity. The SPARS also used the cache of Mainbocher’s name to their advantage in recruitment literature, claiming, “SPARS are among the best-dressed
women in this nation at war. Their military but feminine navy blue uniforms, designed by Mainbocher… are made of the best materials obtainable.”Fashioning the woman soldier as “military but feminine” was a reliable way to keep gender roles in check.

By emphasizing socially acceptable “feminine” interests like fashion and cosmetics, instead of duty to the nation and interest in the masculine work of the military, the government attempted to create a place for women in the military that would not compromise their femininity. Historian Melissa McEuen writes, “Recruitment literature centered on women’s traditional pursuits and domestic interests in order to normalize the notion of their joining the military.” Recruitment literature adapted the role of “woman” to the role of “soldier” by transferring feminine pursuits into the military domain. But by keeping those pursuits definitively contained within the realm of the sex-segregated women’s corps, it did not compromise the essential maleness of the military. The male military corps, it was decided, were not to be changed by the inclusion of women’s interests – a separate corps, with separate recruitment literature, would maintain clear gender boundaries and safely house “feminine” pursuits in one place, and “masculine” pursuits in another. Through the use of uniforms, the military compartmentalized women. While the uniforms and expectations for male soldiers did not change, the military continued to reinforce gender stereotypes to construct the female military image.

A heavy emphasis on tailoring and flattering fit in recruitment literature revealed further governmental concern that women in uniform conform to the ideal feminine body image. U.S. authorities “recommended and in some places demanded that women’s suits be tailored. Such messages implied that alterations were to announce female silhouettes to the public, making bust lines and waistlines visible.” Distinct from masculine suit
tailoring, this “tailored femininity” highlighted in women’s recruitment literature was meant to accentuate and announce the female figure. Constant mentions of a “flattering fit” in recruitment pamphlets underscored women’s body image concerns and reminded them that, even in a prestigious military uniform, their bodies were still subject to scrutiny. A uniform would not protect them from the male gaze; in fact, uniforms could even intensify it. When WAVES ensign Joan Angel returned home on her first furlough, she recalled, “I started an epidemic of neck-craning.”\textsuperscript{xv} Angel teases her friend Connie, a fellow WAVE, about the constant attention she receives from men – Connie replies, “It isn’t me they go for – it’s the uniform.”\textsuperscript{xvi} Wearing a uniform made a woman stand out and designated her as a soldier or sailor. The public visibility of a uniform could make women vulnerable to excess or unwanted attention, especially considering the often hostile public climate towards military women.

Contemporary standards of beauty, which included an idealized body shape, were still applied to women in military uniform. Foundation garments became a problem for the military because some women required them for a “neat and military appearance” but could not be forced to wear them if not issued. This was an unprecedented problem for the military.\textsuperscript{xvii} In her memoirs, WAC officer Charity Adams recalled of GI girdles, “This was the item of issue that was not required to be worn unless needed, but often those who needed it most would not wear it, and some who did not need the girdle would wear it. It was really getting rather personal when one had to call someone in for a conference to suggest that wearing a girdle might make for a more attractive appearance. That was just one of the less pleasant chores.”\textsuperscript{xviii} Even with so many considerations of greater
national importance, Army command still fixated on keeping women’s bodies in line with ideal standards of feminine beauty.

The woman soldier’s girdle also became the object of national attention in the media. Two *New York Times* articles discussed GI girdles and underwear at length and with utter seriousness, underscoring the pressure on women to shape their bodies to the ideal image while in uniform. A WAC press release published in *The New York Times* stated, “There will be little excuse for the uniforms of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps bulging in the wrong places, for the Army, it is announced, is going to issue two girdles each to members of the unit.”xix In another article, writer Kathleen McLaughlin made sure to note that WACs are allotted 1.5 minutes each for girdle fitting. She remarked that, for the press, the “greatest novelty about the WAC uniforms was the new pale cafe au lait color used for the jersey slips and panties...The biggest surprise was the fine quality of tearose-tinted foundation garments, invariably ‘two-piecers,’ the girdles boneless except for two light front stays for the fuller figures.” McLaughlin went into even more detail about the girdles, “They are made of excellent quality ‘corset batiste,’ resembling lightweight silk faille or bengaline, and are combined with stain-back lastex panels and insets of elasticized net or ‘powder net.’”xx It may seem like McLaughlin included an excessive amount of detail about women’s undergarments, almost to the point of absurdity. But the volume of detail given is significant because it reveals the importance placed upon women’s underwear and the role it played in shaping women’s bodies to fit idealized standards of beauty. The additional fact that the article was written by a woman reveals the constancy of women’s consciousness of the need to shape their bodies to that ideal.

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ix McEuen, *Making War, Making Women*, 145
ii Ibid., 68
vii McEuen, Making War, Making Women, 43
ix Ibid., 142
x “It’s the Vogue,” U.S. Marine Corps Women’s Reserve, Box 5, Folder 167, Women in World War II Pamphlets, Vault 940.53, W87p. Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
xii McEuen, Making War, Making Women, 36
xii “Facts about SPARS,” U.S. Coast Guard Women’s Reserve, Box 5, Folder 169, Women in World War II Pamphlets, Schlesinger Library.
xxi McEuen, Making War, Making Women, 36
xiii Ibid., 142
xiv Angel, Angel of the Navy, 94
xv Ibid., 112
xvi Treadwell, The Women’s Army Corps, 39
xvii Earley, One Woman’s Arm, 82.
Media Portrayals of Military Women

The media, following directives from the government, attempted to persuade the public through various means that military service would not lessen women’s femininity. The media took a keen interest in the women’s military services. Particularly, newspapers and magazines highlighted women’s appearance in military uniform, dedicating a huge number of articles to the styles of the uniforms of the different branches, their designer origins, and the way women looked in uniform. The message transmitted from almost every media outlet was essentially the same: women in military uniform are still feminine. In fact, the media sometimes argued that women may be made even more feminine by their military status. The highly cultivated image of the female soldier which was portrayed constantly in the media was the result of direct involvement by the government. The Office of War Information urged media outlets to disseminate the government’s official line: ‘Women in uniform are no less feminine than before they enlisted.” Balancing the “military” with the “feminine” through public images, women were always pictured with perfect hair and makeup, idealized body shapes, often with domestic undertones (i.e. a soldier boyfriend in the background), and usually not doing any kind of manual work. Their uniforms took a starring role, while the women themselves were often secondary to their own appearance.

The media had a great deal of power over how military women would be seen by the American public. The government’s control over the media was indirect, so media outlets and individual writers still had a large degree of freedom in how they chose to present the women’s services. The Office of War Information, in reaction to scandalous rumors about the WAC, blamed the media for poor representation of women’s military organizations
which had led to low recruitment rates. The OWI castigated the media for failing to convey to women that their femininity would not be damaged by military service. An OWI informational pamphlet directed at the media entitled “Women in the War… For the Final Push to Victory” stated, “Women have not been told in national publicity that military service does not destroy their femininity nor detract from it. There has not been sufficient emphasis on the fact that women in the Armed Forces are respected as women, and that they are not remodeled into some other kind of half-male, half-female hybrid.” This quote reveals the importance of gender difference to the government: maintaining clear lines between what is “male” and what is “female” was key to government policy of military recruitment. The OWI wanted media outlets to tell women that the military encouraged them to not only “remain feminine, but to try and become ‘more so’.” To accomplish these goals, this OWI pamphlet instructed writers to emphasize that women were allowed to wear makeup in uniform, and informed advertisers to depict images of Army handbags with compacts and lipstick cases clearly shown. “Tempering military life with a well made-up face…would, they hoped, convince skeptics and critics.”

By framing women’s military service as another way in which women were submissive to men, writers hoped to lessen their threat to gender roles. A WAC introductory book by Nancy Shea told recruits, “As women, we do our best work when we are striving for masculine approval! Not that this feminine trait detracts one whit from patriotism or lessens the effort to win the war.” Here, Shea couches women’s military service within a so-called “feminine” desire to seek male approval. She goes on, “Waacs find themselves completely surrounded by men... Being women, they like taking orders from Army officers, though some would be slow to admit it, and the work is more thrilling even if it is the same
office routine." Not only are women soldiers “surrounded by men” with men in positions of authority over them, the women enjoy “taking orders” from those men, fulfilling the stereotype of women as docile and submissive. Here, Shea is also careful to include the fact that most military women were doing work that was the same or similar to what they would do in civilian life: primarily, clerical work.

The book goes on to reveal an interesting gendered paradox in military uniforms: “From time immemorial, brass buttons and a uniform have made a strong appeal to the feminine sex. It is small wonder that military weddings flourish.” Military uniforms are historically appealing to women because they send messages about the wearer’s strength, power, and overall masculinity. However, when the wearer is a woman, the implications of the uniform change. Shea here uses the historical precedent of uniform appeal to support the growing numbers of military weddings in the WAC, an approach meant to temper the masculinization of women soldiers by emphasizing their role as wives. But in doing so, she brings up questions about what kind of appeal a uniformed woman has on the masculine sex. Though the masculine qualities of strength and power portrayed by a uniform might have come across, they were mitigated by the uniform’s embodiment of femininity through skirts, tailoring, and structural undergarments. The potential sex appeal of a military uniform may have been another reason the government focused so intently on softening the uniform for women.

Though the media used a variety of tactics to convince women that military service would not lessen their femininity, this was not enough. They went one step further, and argued that military life would increase feminine qualities. One article in *The New York Times* early in the war said of female soldiers, “Slimmer by an aggregate of about twenty-
four pounds, the first local Waac's to return home from two months’ training at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, illustrated yesterday ‘what the Army can do’ for a woman. A slimmer physique was seen as a positive effect of military life, which conformed with governmental concerns about women’s undergarments and maintenance of a conventionally attractive, feminine appearance in uniform.

Another public relations strategy to convince the public that American women maintained their femininity in uniform was pioneered by WAC leader Oveta Culp Hobby. An article quoted her saying that every woman in uniform “enabled one father to remain with his family” and thereby helped preserve “the core of American civilization and culture.” She went on, “Women as a group have always been the exponents, the proponents, of family life. They may preserve and protect this.” Hobby attempted to spin criticisms and fears that the women in the Armed Forces would take on overly masculine roles by framing their military service as not just patriotic, but as the natural extension of their gender role. In a somewhat convoluted way, serving in the military helped women to fulfill their “natural” role as the keeper of family life. Since the family unit, according to Hobby and the government, was the “core of American civilization,” women were doing their duty in a way that the government hoped would seem acceptably feminine. Women were not branching too far out of the realm of their traditional gender role; their position in the hyper-masculine military was thus softened and stripped of any threat to gender role divisions.

This strategy, unfortunately, was not convincing enough for the majority of the American people, particularly for American men. The most potent threat to the women’s military organizations was the attitude of men towards women in uniform. Despite the
official line that women “object to discipline,” leaders of the auxiliary services admitted that the real reason women were failing to enlist was position of men. New York Times writer Bess Furman stated frankly in article about failing recruitment rates, “Most men simply do not want their wives or sweethearts to go into uniform.” Furman’s bluntness about this fact could have been due to her position as a female journalist in an industry run primarily by men. Her stark recognition of the fact that women were unduly influenced by male opinions when deciding whether or not to enlist underscores the immensity of the obstacles the women’s military organizations faced in recruitment. Despite recruitment literature that appealed to feminine interests, the military was still viewed by most men as the domain of men alone. Another article in The New York Times warned that the thought of a women’s Army “may make some old-fashioned men wonder what’s happened to the country. It seems only yesterday that nice girls didn’t show their ankles, and now they’re to be soldiers.” Immediately after this statement, the writer attempted to assuage the fears of these “old-fashioned men”: “Yet the WAAC is sensible. It will not be a Battalion of Death. It will be an army of typists, telephone operators, clerks and laboratory technicians…The feminine quality will not be lost under uniform, nor impaired by a trifle of close-order drill.” The media’s attempts to confront the prejudices of men against women in uniform were often centered on this approach: soften the perceived threat to masculinity by over-emphasizing women’s femininity despite their uniforms. Even when those attempts had success, the success had limitations. Time magazine reported in 1943, “The male civilian has come around to a lukewarm endorsement of the idea for others but balks at the thought of his "little woman" joining.” Once the women’s military organizations surpassed the hurdle of getting civilian men to accept women soldiers as
an obscure concept, there was another, even greater obstacle: men would still refuse to support their own wives, girlfriends, or sisters enlisting.

The women’s corps faced resistance not only from civilian men, but also from within the ranks of their own military organizations. When the WAC was first formed, the Army considered it “forced upon [them]”. Edith Nourse Rogers, who wrote the bill creating the WAC and propelled it through Congress, commented, “The War Department was very unwilling to have these women as part of the Army.”ix Other women’s military organizations suffered similar experiences. One article in Time magazine stated, “Soldiers who have been in action want their women to join, but servicemen who have not yet been overseas still think a woman's place is home.”x Male soldiers’ views also differed based on whether or not they had real experience with women soldiers. Those men who worked with WACs or WAVES usually found them to be competent and essential to the war effort. But those men who had never encountered a woman soldier often held prejudiced views based on what they considered “correct” for women.

Some military men refused to accept the notion having women in the Armed Forces at all. One staff sergeant stationed in North Africa wrote in a letter Time declaring, “Woman's place is in the home, and there they should be with their knitting and their ranges. Keep 'Em Frying!” He claimed that women were only joining the military for the pay, which they – in their feminine frivolity – would use on new clothes: “Try flashing a few bills in a girl's face. Doesn't she dash like mad to the closest half-decent dress shop?... By the same token, the prospect of wearing a bright new uniform at no cost, or at a moderate fee to one's self, looms nicely in a girl's mind.”xii The misogynistic ideas propagated by this article were unfortunately shared by many American servicemen who
had never worked with servicewomen, who thought women were useless in war and only interested in clothes and cosmetics. Recruitment literature for the women’s military branches had done little to dispel this notion, using fashionable, feminine uniforms as their primary recruitment tactic. These servicemen’s ideas were supported by narrow-minded articles, like one in *Time* entitled “Maedchen in Uniform?” that propagated misogynistic ideas. This article, written by eminent Harvard anthropologist Earnest A. Hooton, proclaimed that Army life “would improve [women’s] physiques and general beauty by teaching them proper posture and a graceful gait… Besides, by divesting them of excess and peculiarly localized fatty deposits, it would enable them to wear pants without creating a repellent spectacle. Dressing all women in uniform would finally convince men that in truth ‘women are all alike’ and that consequently there is no hurry about grabbing any one of them for a life partner.” Hooton uses women’s uniforms, not as a distinguishing feature or a point of pride, but as a symbol of female uniformity. The overt misogyny in this article, given an air of authority because it was written by an esteemed academic, reinforced beauty ideals through the objectification of women’s bodies and the blithe assumption that all women are the same. It also shows male resistance to women in slacks, a topic that will be discussed at length in Chapter 2.

In a Letter to the Editor in *Time* magazine, Betty Lou Ford responded to articles disparaging the low rates of enlistment in the women’s corps and recognized that the issue was not necessarily with women, but with men. She wrote, “Women, though independent to a certain extent, still live to please men. When the uncomplimentary remarks made by our men about the WACs, WAVES, SPARS, and Marines are curtailed, we believe the enlistment of women will leap to surprising heights.” Though still
undermining women’s autonomy and agency with the missive “women live to please men,” this woman pointed out a very real issue: women would not join the military if they thought it would upset the men in their lives, or impair their chances of finding a husband.

Some women’s magazines attempted to mitigate this issue by advising women on ways to maintain their feminine charms in their new masculine environment. *Good Housekeeping* offered women a list of suggestions on how to wear military uniforms, “hoping to generate approval from American men who had not yet warmed up to women’s newest clothing options nor (although left unsaid) to the jobs, salaries, titles, and opportunities requiring such apparel.” Suggestions about hairstyles, cosmetics, jewelry, and hygiene were made alongside admonitions like, “Don’t swagger or stride along in masculine fashion,” and recommendations to wear a uniform “modestly, simply, and unself-consciously, never with a self-righteous air.” *Woman’s Wear Daily* prophesized that “women who either wear uniforms or adopt masculine strides during wartime work will feel the urge of contrast to look more feminine when working hours are over.” Essentially, these magazines warned against “anything that seemed to indicate inappropriate gender crossing” and advised women to overcompensate with femininity. Historian Melissa McEuen contends, “Behind this and similar advice dispensed during the war years were echoes of a nagging fear that military service had the power to so confuse gender boundaries as to yield irrevocable cultural change.” The negative reaction from men to women’s increased independence and invasion of male spheres led to many articles like these in women’s magazines which attempted to advise women on how to adequately subjugate themselves to assuage men’s fears. One way of doing this was to compare military women with other civilian women, and not with military men, making gender the
primary factor in identity. Women soldiers, some magazine writers suggested, were not the peers of male soldiers. By putting them on the same plane as civilian women, the women’s media undermined women’s role in the military by overemphasizing their connection to the civilian world.

But the media alone could not fix the damage done to the image of the WAC and other military organizations, partially because it was the media itself which had wrought much of the damage in the first place. As the war went on, military women themselves started to take ownership of recruitment and attempted to repair their sullied images, which had been heavily damaged by nationwide rumor campaigns. Since they had little power to change their image in the media, they attempted to do so in their everyday lives. Even in her memoirs, WAVE Joan Angel was still battling against the tarnished image of the women’s military. She wrote, “No, it isn’t true what they say about WAVES and SPARS. What do they say? Practically everything. I’ve heard scandalous stories about wild parties, and on the other hand, I’ve heard more than one comment that ‘those Navy girls certainly stick to their colors, all right’… Neither generalization strikes me as correct. Girls in the Navy are just like girls anywhere else. If they’ve been party-gals at home, a uniform isn’t going to change them.”

Women faced many questions and criticisms of their military service while living out their lives in uniform. As wearers of a uniform tarnished with scandal, women felt an obligation to put on a show of good behavior because they knew they were a reflection of their organization. One WAVES newsletter urged women, “The rampant propaganda against women in uniform can best be answered by each one of us. Our personal pride in our Women’s Reserve, in our Navy, in our uniforms, and in ourselves determines public opinion of not one but all of us.”
responsibility, according to this writer, lay within the WAVES ranks to gain due recognition and determine the future of the reserve.\textsuperscript{xvi} It was a heavy burden to bear along with the burden of double consciousness that military women already carried.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{i} McEuen, \textit{Making War, Making Women}, 147
\item \textsuperscript{ii} Ibid., 43
\item \textsuperscript{iii} Shea, \textit{The Waacs}, 190
\item \textsuperscript{iv} "7 WAAC Officers Back From Camp." \textit{The New York Times}, September 18, 1942.
\item \textsuperscript{v} "Tells How Waacs Help." \textit{The New York Times}, July 5, 1943.
\item \textsuperscript{vi} Furman, Bess. "Recruiting for the WAC Fails to Fill the Need." \textit{The New York Times}, December 5, 1943.
\item \textsuperscript{vii} "Enter the WAACs." \textit{The New York Times}, May 16, 1942.
\item \textsuperscript{viii} "In This Total War." \textit{Time}, Vol 42, 26, December 27, 1943.
\item \textsuperscript{ix} Treadwell, \textit{The Women's Army Corps}, 18
\item \textsuperscript{x} "In This Total War." \textit{Time}.
\item \textsuperscript{xi} "A Mess Anyhow." \textit{Time}, Vol 40, 24, December 14, 1942.
\item \textsuperscript{xii} "Maedchen in Uniform?" \textit{Time}, Vol 45, 26, June 25, 1945.
\item \textsuperscript{xiii} "Letters." \textit{Time}, Vol 43, 6, February 7, 1944.
\item \textsuperscript{xiv} McEuen, \textit{Making War, Making Women}, 145
\item \textsuperscript{xv} Angel, \textit{Angel of the Navy}, 193
\item \textsuperscript{xvi} "Every WAVE a Recruiter." \textit{The Havelock}, Vol 2, 7, January 1944. Jane Barton Papers, MC 542, Box 3, Folder 3.2. Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
\end{itemize}
Reactions to Female Sexuality in the Male Workplace: The Rumor Campaign

“While things were going smoothly and pleasantly at the Training Center, the American public had lost part of its love for the women in the service or their love for the idea. It had heard nothing but glowing reports during the first six months; now, new stories began to hint of less savory things, that women in the service were strange and frustrated, looking for women or women associates. Many had forgotten that the military had not promised to change the character of any adult but only to train her for service so that she could replace a man for duty closer to the war. There were those who were thoroughly convinced that the WAAC was a system of organized prostitution for the Army. We lived through that period, too, with its cartoon and dirty jokes and vile insinuations.”

Despite widespread efforts by the government and the media to balance military women’s conflicting identities through uniforms and public presentation, there were limits on their success. Though they attempted to present women soldiers in an acceptably feminine way, the challenges of double consciousness could not be entirely overcome. Men, particularly servicemen, remained convinced that the concepts of “woman” and “soldier” could not be reconciled. In the face of growing female involvement in the military, these men lashed out at the women whose presence they viewed as unnatural or immoral. This backlash came in the form of a slander campaign in the media which aimed to destroy the reputation of the women’s services and send a message to women that, despite their best efforts, they would not be accepted as soldiers and would only ever be seen for their gender.

In their sex-segregated women’s military organizations, women were spending almost all of their time with other women. Though many women did work alongside men in offices and hospitals, women lived in apartments and barracks with other women and formed tight social groups. As the war went on and more men were sent to the front lines,
the workplace gender ratio became even more skewed towards the female. Without the constant presence of males, some in society feared that lesbianism – then considered immoral and unnatural – would take over. On the other hand, a vicious slander campaign against female soldiers insinuated that they were only present in the military as prostitutes for the male Army. These two contradictory reactions to women’s sexuality in the military reveal the range of fears that men in both official and unofficial positions had about female sexual power and the importance of sexual morality for women.

The women's services were strongly opposed by the Catholic Church in America due to issues with female sexuality. *The Brooklyn Tablet* claimed the WACs were "no more than an opening wedge, intended to break down the traditional American and Christian opposition to removing women from the home and to degrade her by bringing back the pagan female goddess of desexed, lustful sterility." This critique highlights the duality of fears about women in the Armed Forces: on the one hand, they would be “desexed” and sterile, stripped of their natural femininity and biological inclination to motherhood and made more like men. But on the other hand, they would also be “lustful” pagan goddesses, their sexuality gone rampant, their femininity becoming dangerous. These two images of the woman soldier as both too masculine and too feminine accurately depict the contradictory fears about lesbianism and prostitution in the women’s military.

Fears about lesbianism were tied closely to fears about women becoming overly masculinized and taking the place of men, not only in military jobs, but in sexual relationships. The fact that the women’s services were made up of primarily young, unmarried women heightened this fear. “Some people,” historian D’Ann Campbell writes, “baffled by the apparent incongruity of women in soldiers’ uniforms and by the
manifestations of comradeship among unmarried women that involved hugging and kissing, concluded that sexual perversion must be the explanation.”

It was likely true that some women in the military engaged in same-sex relationships; however, this was certainly not the norm, according to the statistics of heterosexual dating, engagements, and marriages within the women’s services, as well as national statistics about female homosexuality.

Rumors about prostitution and sexual promiscuity within the WAC were the direct result of resistance by enlisted men to the inclusion of women in the armed forces. By demoralizing and denigrating the status of the women’s corps, enlisted men (either consciously or subconsciously) hoped to retain their role as the proper guardians and protectors of the nation and put women back in their “place.” By viewing women stereotypically and uniformly as sexual objects, men removed their power and agency and attempted to reverse their gains towards equality in the workplace.

The rumor campaign “painting all women soldiers as sexually promiscuous” also came at a time when the government was increasing its recruiting efforts and emphasizing “how badly women were needed to release men for combat.” In June 1943, Eleanor Darnton Washington of The New York Times reported on a series of four articles written from Washington by John O’Donnell for The Daily News of New York which started the slander campaign: “He first brought the question of the morality of the Waacs to the attention of the public on June 4 when he mentioned ‘the gaudy stories of the gay and careless way in which the young ladies in uniform disport themselves’; on June 9 he wrote, ‘Contraceptives and prophylactic equipment will be furnished to members of the Waacs according to a super secret agreement reached by the high-ranking officers of the
War Department and the Waac chieftain.” Another story about Waacs\textsuperscript{vi} who had been sent home from North Africa because they were pregnant gained traction soon after. The number climbed from the original 26 to 90 to 500 as the rumor spread. It was soundly denied by the military as false, especially considering the fact that only 292 Waacs were even in North Africa. Three had been sent home, one for gallbladder surgery, one for a nervous disorder, and one for pregnancy, but she was married to an Army officer and did not find out she was pregnant until she arrived in Africa, upon which she promptly returned home.\textsuperscript{vii}

These rumors were started and circulated primarily by American servicemen. One Army survey reported that 84\% of soldiers disliked the idea of women soldiers and would advise a woman not to join. In addition to feeling the threat of women’s presence in the previously all-male military, women in uniform meant that “men would be moved out of safe ‘women’s work’ and reassigned to the battlefront.” \textsuperscript{viii} Military leaders were quick to deny the rumors and vigorously defend the women’s corps, going so far as to call the rumors “Nazi-inspired” and “Axis propaganda.” \textsuperscript{ix} On June 10, just one day after the contraceptive/prophylactic rumor began, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson responded, “My attention has been attracted to sinister rumors aimed at destroying the reputation of the Waacs. I have made a thorough investigation of these rumors. They are absolutely and completely false.” The fact that the Secretary of War responded so promptly showed the seriousness with which the government took these rumors. Upon his return from North Africa, where he had worked with many Waacs, General George C. Marshall addressed a conference of governors in Columbus, Ohio about the slander campaign: “I returned from Africa two weeks ago to find the most atrocious, if not subversive, attack being
directed against an organization of the Army, one of the finest we have ever created…

There was no foundation for the vicious slander, though it was given wide publicity. Some seem to be intent on the suicide of our own war effort, not to mention the defamation of as fine an organization of women as I have ever seen assembled. Such a procedure to me appears inexcusable. If we can’t be decent in such matters we at least should not be naive enough to destroy ourselves.” The government clearly took these rumors to heart and did everything in their power to quell them, but the ideas had already taken root in the public and recruitment for not only the women’s Army but for all the women’s corps suffered significantly because of it. Though the rumors seemed self-destructive and ruinous to military leaders, there was precedent for such a slander campaign. In England, women’s military organizations suffered similar degradation in the media when they were first formed. In that case, an independent commission was required to investigate the rumors, which were of course unfounded.x

Military nurses, though accepted more favorably by the public because of the long history of female nurses, were still subject to the same slanderous rumor campaign as the WACs and WAVES about their sexual immorality. Historian D’Ann Campbell contends, “It was a reaction to the sexual-social strains imposed upon enlisted men by the military system, joined, in some cases, with a firm belief that no women, not even nurses, belonged in uniform.”xi

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i Earley, One Woman’s Army, 70.
iii Campbell, *Women at War with America*, 28
iv For more information on the topic of women’s sexuality and homosexuality in the WAC, see Meyer, Leisa D. *Creating G.I. Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women’s Army Corps During World War II.* New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 1998
v Ibid., 37
vi At that point in the war, the women’s branch of the Army was called the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), since they were an auxiliary service working for, not with, the regular Army. Due to a myriad of
logistical problems, the WAAC was converted to full status in 1943 and became the Women’s Army Corps (WAC).


vii Campbell, *Women at War with America*, 39


x Ibid.

xi Campbell, *Women at War with America*, 58
Conclusion

The uniforms that the WACs, WAVES, SPARS, and Marines wore during World War II simultaneously reflected the feminine qualities the government, the media, and the public valued, and the masculine traits required of women to become soldiers. Prescriptive femininity in the form of skirts and fashion-conscious recruitment literature tempered the gender threat that women in the masculine role of “soldier” posed. But despite these attempts to adapt traditional womanhood to the male workplace that women now inhabited, backlash against the women’s military centered on male fears of female independence and sexual power. A rumor campaign attacking the moral character of servicewomen not only damaged recruitment efforts for all the women’s corps, but revealed deeply ingrained prejudices against women who strayed from their “proper” place.
III. CHAPTER 2: WOMEN IN THE DEFENSE INDUSTRY

In contrast to the 350,000 women who enlisted in the military during World War II, there were nearly 2 million women working in the defense industry at the height of the war in 1944. Women made up a substantial part of the workforce in factories building planes, bombers, ships, ammunition, and other tools of war. While women had been recruited to factory work during World War I, the material demands of the Second World War, brought on by the larger scale of the war and new developments in technology, required that many more women be brought into the labor force. Early in the war, the need for “womanpower” became clear, but many employers resisted the idea of hiring women for what had been traditionally considered men’s work. It was only when the reserve of manpower ran dry that employers began to reluctantly hire women to fill men’s places.

Though these WOWs (women ordnance workers) worked alongside men, equal in their jobs, payment, and clothing, women had an extra burden placed upon them. They were both defense workers, contributing to the war effort in a masculine job sphere in male clothing, and also women, expected to embody the ideals of traditional femininity. Women were supposed to perform men’s jobs to the best of their ability, while also looking and acting appropriately feminine, fostering an uneasy sense of double consciousness. Women who had children had an even greater dual role to play, working two full-time jobs as defense worker and wife/mother/homemaker. The dilemma of double consciousness manifested itself in similar ways for women in the defense industry as it did for women in the military, with some significant differences. Female defense workers had the added challenge of wearing slacks to work on a daily basis, which made expressing their
femininity more difficult than military women whose uniforms included skirts. Both groups of women dealt with rumors about their sexual promiscuity, and both struggled to conform to an idealized image of femininity while also presenting a professional identity that was traditionally conceptualized as masculine.

Not quite a year into the war, the government - with the cooperation of the media - initiated a nationwide recruitment campaign to get women to take defense industry jobs. The challenge was “to inspire women to participate fully in the war effort without compromising their femininity.” The jobs women were performing in factories were seen as highly masculine because they required manual labor, which had historically been performed by men. The masculine image of these jobs was further heightened by the fact that women were required to wear what was considered men’s clothing: slacks and overalls. For safety reasons, women in the defense industry had to wear this masculine garb, which made creating a feminine appearance even more challenging. Just like with recruitment efforts for the women’s military, the government and the media placed a strong emphasis on maintaining a feminine image for female ordnance workers. Fears about the over-masculinization of women due to their male jobs and apparel manifested themselves in an exaggeration of feminine qualities. Women ordnance workers were depicted in the media as embodying feminine beauty and body ideals: coiffed hair, polished nails, flawless skin, tasteful makeup, and clothes that accentuated busts and waists. The domestic nature of women ordnance workers was emphasized to a large degree in the media. Women featured in articles and ad campaigns like Ponds’ “She’s Engaged, She’s Lovely, She Used Ponds!” were frequently represented in relation to a husband or fiancé for whom their war work was dedicated. In the Ponds advertisements,
a woman who was contributing to the war effort (most often a defense worker, but sometimes a military woman or a civilian woman doing volunteer work) was featured, discussing how she kept her complexion flawless during her war work by using Ponds. That lovely complexion, the ad copy implied, was what helped her snag a fiancé, and invariably her war work was intended solely to get him home sooner.iii

Even at the height of the war, men still occupied 95% of jobs.iv As more women joined the male-dominated workforce, workplaces became increasingly sexually integrated, creating a variety of issues with female sexuality and how to contain it. Uniform rules were put in place in many factories to regulate “Sweater Girls,” whose sexuality, it was feared, had the power to distract and demoralize all the men in a plant. Women faced a serious dilemma: they had to be feminine and sexually appealing enough to avoid being seen as too masculine, but if they were too feminine and appealing, they would also receive censure. Women had to find ways to make themselves look appropriately feminine, but not glamorous (which would make them appear frivolous and incapable of performing their job) or sexy (which might lead to unwanted sexual advances). This challenge was more potent for defense workers than servicewomen because the risk of sexual harassment was greater for women working in the defense industry than for those in the sexually segregated women’s military organizations.

In 1942, Wilhela Cushman, Fashion Editor of Ladies’ Home Journal, wrote an article proclaiming "Now It’s Woman’s Work": “Shoulder to shoulder, women are working with men - eight and ten hour shifts, in the defense factories of the nation. The same responsibilities, same wages, same clothes - overalls and pants. There’s no feeling of strangeness about these women in men’s jobs and men’s clothes - no loss of femininity
either. In fact, women are setting a pace for men - setting standards of appearance too, neatness and cleanliness. In this article, though proclaiming women’s equality with men in their factory jobs, Cushman reveals some underlying fears about gender boundary erasure. She emphasizes that though these female workers are wearing men’s clothes and doing men’s jobs, they are not “strange” or unnatural. They still maintain their femininity and domesticity, which normalizes their controversial presence in a male workplace and appearance in masculine clothing. When it was acknowledged, as in this article, that women were changing how factories worked, it was always in some domestic way, making the factory cleaner, brighter, and lovelier with their feminine presence.

*The Aero Mechanic*, a newsletter for workers in a Boeing factory during the war, published an issue that included a series of questions meant to help women workers determine their “FQ,” or “Femininity Quotient”: “Those who managed to combine work with traditional concepts of femininity in attire, tastes, and behavior off the job” scored the highest. In other words, those women who had managed to negotiate between their two identities as “worker” and “woman” were deemed the most feminine, the most capable, the most successful. In order to help women workers to maintain their “FQ” the Women’s Recreational Activity Council at Boeing scheduled “charm courses, which offered instruction in proper dress and makeup, poise, and personality development.” It was of the utmost importance to industry leaders that women maintain a conventionally feminine appearance and attitude in order to temper the perceived threat of their invasion of not only the male workplace, but of masculine attire. Though *The Aero Mechanic* and *The Ladies’ Home Journal* had completely different writers and readership, they both conveyed to women the importance of embodying femininity while in uniform. Women's
factory uniforms, whether official or unofficial, and their public presentation bridged the gap between traditional concepts of femininity and women’s jobs in the defense industry.


iii For examples of the Ponds “She’s Engaged, She’s Lovely, She Uses Ponds!” advertisement series, see *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

iv Campbell, *Women at War with America*, 100


Women’s Public Presentation: Slacks and Hair

Slacks and Public Perception

In contrast to women in the military, the major change in women’s public presentation when they joined the industrial workforce was the switch from skirts to slacks. Slacks, traditionally viewed as men’s clothing, were particularly controversial because they minimized gender difference in the workplace, blurring the already strained boundaries between male and female spheres. Women in men’s clothing appeared to be flouting gender roles, a dangerous thing to the conservative-minded, family-oriented American society of the 1940s. This was specifically the issue the women’s military corps wished to avoid when they decided to adopt skirts for their uniforms. But while most servicewomen were engaged in clerical work, for which skirts were appropriate, defense workers worked alongside dangerous machinery that could make skirts a lethal choice.

This was the first period of time in which women in large numbers appeared in public wearing something other than skirts. Even during the war, the majority of American women still resided in the home. According to Census Bureau statistics, 30 million women were housewives in 1941; by 1944, 7 out of 8 were still at home. Men still held 95% of wartime jobs, so the working woman was still very much a novelty. Slacks were identified with traditionally masculine jobs and spaces, which women were now beginning to invade. When a woman wore slacks, it represented a threat to the gendered social order, a public flouting of a woman’s traditional domestic role. Overt resentment from both men and women towards slack-clad women workers reveals how potent this threat was.
Official messages and media portrayals of women in slacks tended to over-emphasize women’s femininity in spite of their masculine apparel, highlighting traditionally feminine features, the idealized female figure, and women’s fundamental domestic role. Women themselves held a wide range of opinions on slacks and worked in various ways to maintain their femininity and individuality while in slacks. Unlike women in the military, women ordnance workers often had greater freedom of choice in their apparel. There were hundreds of thousands more women defense workers than women soldiers, making uniform regulations more difficult to enforce than in the comparatively small women’s corps. Whereas the women’s military was under direct control of the government, the defense industry was made up of several companies, so uniform rules varied from factory to factory. Though many factories issued women official uniforms, just as many did not. In those cases, women were expected to follow a dress code that produced the unofficial “factory worker uniform” ubiquitous in the wartime era: slacks or overalls, shirt or sweater, low-heeled shoes, and hair covered with either a hat or a bandana. Within the general structure of a “uniform” designed for their role on the production line, women found room for self-expression. However, this self-expression was mitigated by social concerns about their diminished femininity.

Government messages about slacks revealed the persistence of sex consciousness in the workplace. Policies and official rhetoric emphasized that a woman was still a woman despite wearing masculine clothes. This tactic of emphasizing gender difference despite clothing that appeared to cross gender lines was not new. In the nineteenth century, women lawyers encountered a similar problem when wearing the robes of their profession. It was made clear then, as it would be in World War II, that
“within the robe there is a woman.” Historian Melissa McEuen gives a similar description of the rhetoric surrounding women defense workers in World War II, underlining the endurance of tensions between femininity and public image. She writes, “Underneath the masculine attire, the garb necessary for physically demanding and dangerous work, were the spirit and body of an American archetype... A worker’s trousers could be removed after her shift ended and replaced for good after the war ended, official propaganda insinuated.” It was important to the government that, despite the clothing they wore, the bodies of women workers were still perceived as the same as civilian women.

The government also held opinions on how women themselves would react to factory clothing. Government reports warned industry leaders that women “dislike too much standardization and insist on the right to keep themselves attractive, even at work.” Women, as opposed to men, desired “something of the well-dressed aspect” in addition to safety and comfort in their work clothes. However, the government agencies that came to this conclusion did so without the input of women themselves. According to historian Michael Renov, “This tendency to avoid female participation in the design of programs and policies related to women’s affairs remained evident throughout the war years and helps to define the concrete character of patriarchy during the period.” There was a distinction between how women really felt about their uniforms and what men said women felt on their behalf. In women’s own accounts, their feelings about slacks were much more ambivalent than male leaders and writers let on.

Industry leaders had varying opinions on whether or not women should be required to wear uniforms, but all agreed that women must wear slacks for their own safety. As early as September 1942, the Ford Company required all its women workers to wear slacks on
the job. Other companies, like Curtiss-Wright and Boeing Aircraft, required women to wear official or company-approved uniforms of either slacks, coveralls, or overalls. For the most part, these rules were put in place without female participation. There are a few examples to the contrary, such as Consolidated Aircraft, where the first 200 women hired were allowed to vote on whether or not they would wear uniforms, and they voted in the affirmative. One industry report encouraged this kind of behavior, noting that women were happier when they had a choice in what they were required to wear, citing “employee goodwill” as a workplace advantage. Various pamphlets (such as “Womanpower Can Produce the Goods of War” and “Supervising the Woman War Worker”) suggested that female participation in uniform design was beneficial to women’s workplace efficiency and happiness. But in practice, this approach was the exception rather than the rule. Lacking inroads to the official channels of clothing regulations, women’s control over their appearance occurred most often at the individual level.

Even though some women, like those at Consolidated Aircraft, wanted to wear slacks, many others were resistant to the idea. Employers tried various tactics to get women on board with wearing slacks, the most prevalent of which was an appeal to vanity. In an industry report from 1942, one factory whose management wanted women workers to wear slacks or overalls listed the advantages of such attire in the employee magazine “along with pictures of attractive young employees in the various types of recommended suits.” This tactic was analogous to the advertising of clothes on models in fashion magazines, and was also used frequently with women’s military uniforms, as discussed in Chapter 1. Men assumed women’s vanity would take precedence over any seriousness they had for their jobs: One New York Times article stated somewhat disparagingly, “The
working woman is willing to adjust herself to many new things in the course of her war work, but she refuses to look frumpy. There was tension between men’s criticism of women for wanting flexibility in their clothing, and concern that they would not have enough flexibility.

Despite their convenience and patriotic flair, the mandated wearing of slacks was received differently by different women. Up until this point, women had almost exclusively worn skirts or dresses in public. In the nineteenth century, women wore slacks as a radical action. In the 1930s, slacks appeared more acceptably in the form of glamorous loungewear or as fashion statements made by movie stars. Women working on farms had worn slacks for decades, but for the most part they were out of the public eye. Now, millions of women were joining the war effort, which meant appearing in public in what was considered men’s clothing on a daily basis. Women’s reactions to this heightened visibility and change in apparel were varied. Some women felt insecure wearing slacks because their bodies did not conform to the current ideal image. One woman recalled, “I had never worn [slacks]. I was a lot heavier then… And I felt very self-conscious in them.” However, other women liked the distinction slacks gave them. One woman said of her uniform, “It made me look like I was different and I was working someplace and nobody else was and people would look at me.” Some women appreciated slacks because of their convenience and comfort, and continued wearing them after the were no longer required to: “After we got used to wearing slacks, we’d take cold if we changed back to dresses, so I quit buying any dresses.” Another said, “I won’t get out of them now and I’m not even working in the plant.” And yet, some women simply disliked slacks because of personal preference: “I never did like pants. To this very day, I don’t like pants.” Some
women reveled in the attention they received because they were dressed uniquely and doing unique jobs from most women at the time. Nova Lee McGhee Holbrook, a welder during the war, recalled, “If a lady wore a welder’s cap in transportation, everyone knew you were a welder. It was hard work, but believe me, the people noticed us.” Hollywood designer Muriel King, who designed high-fashion work clothes for women working in the aircraft industry, interviewed women at Boeing and found that “women at work consider it a mark of distinction to wear slacks.” These various women represent the range of opinions women had about the slacks they were required to wear as part of their factory uniforms. However, this variety was rarely represented in the mainstream media or acknowledged by industry leaders.

Despite women’s like or dislike of their factory uniforms, one noted advantage was the ease of uniforms for busy working women. Having a designated slack suit or coverall to wear each day eliminated morning wardrobe decisions and minimized shopping needs. Furthermore, as with the WACs and WAVES, “uniforms showed an esprit de corps and were a daily demonstration of one’s participation in the war.” The WOW (Women Ordnance Workers) campaign even went so far as to compare the uniforms of defense workers to those of the WACs and WAVES, a comparison which was meant to evoke the similarities in patriotism and status between military women and industrial workers.

Rules about slacks were well-enforced on the factory floor, even while other rules were blatantly flouted. Whether women liked wearing slacks or not, they were the only practical option for defense work. Since uniform rules were put in place primarily by male authorities without female input, women workers grappled on an individual level with how
to personalize and feminize their uniforms. An article in *The Ladies Home Journal* elucidates some of the feelings women had about wearing slacks:

"Mrs. Farmer of Wiscasset, Maine doesn't wear slacks because movie stars do, but because they're comfortable, practical, economical… 'They give me freedom of action - and save stockings,' she says. 'They're so comfortable, I like them relaxing as well as working.' Many the Main Street, many the A&P store throughout the nation where women in trousers as the usual, not the unusual sight. We agree with Mrs. Farmer's reasons for wearing them - but we add a warning: be sure your figure is right - slim enough, straight enough and, above all, not bulgy at the hipline. And be sure your husband doesn't object."

This article, published in a popular women's magazine, highlights the practicality of slacks for women in various parts of their life, but still emphasizes that women should conform to idealized body standards and make sure they have the permission of their husbands to wear slacks, reinforcing patriarchal ideas about male control over female bodies. The writer also attempts to normalize the notion of women wearing slacks in public by using the example of a married woman and highlighting her domestic responsibilities. Mrs. Farmer, the all-American suburban housewife, clearly is not challenging gender boundaries and is embodying femininity despite her slacks.

Working within or around factory rules about proper clothing, women often found ways to express their individuality and femininity. Constance Bowman and C.M. Allen, two factory workers during the war, recall in their joint memoir, "The girls we saw wore every type of slacks, from flimsy ones that would have been more appropriate in the boudoir to dungarees, men's pants, and riding breeches. For blouses, they wore crepe torso
affairs... sheer long-sleeved numbers with ruffles, peasant things with gay embroidery, striped T-shirts, and, of course, sweaters, especially a popular number sold by the most garish store in town and ribbed through the midriff for the best 'sweater girl' effect.\textsuperscript{xxxi} Another woman who worked in the defense industry during the war, Ann Pendleton, recalled in her memoir that she and many of the girls working at the factory dressed “unglamorously in cotton blouses and blue slacks,” in compliance with company rules. But since the majority of the women agreed that “a girl wants to look nice,” many wore “alarming ‘pajama suits,’ bright yellow, pale pink, gorgeously flowered,” and “all the girls wear makeup and keep it constantly touched up.”\textsuperscript{xxii} One particular woman, Evelyn, always came to work “with a red rose tucked in her golden hair… white shoes… powder-blue flannel slacks” and a pink puff-sleeved blouse.\textsuperscript{xxiii} Though women workers went to different lengths to express their femininity with clothing, almost all of them strived to “look nice” within the boundaries of factory regulations.

Men were also ambivalent about women wearing slacks, which likely contributed somewhat to women’s ambivalence about their slacks. The criticisms by men (and by men under the guise of women writers) of slacks were primarily focused on women’s bodies, especially when the bodies did not conform to the accepted beauty ideal of the day. Ethel Gorham, author of wartime books such as \textit{So Your Husband’s Gone to War}, argued that men were “violently anti-slacks” and laughed at women who wore them. Her explanation for this resentment was that slacks represented “all the ‘mannish’ jobs” American women had assumed during the war, and suggested that men were concerned about “their own masculine supremacy in the future.” She asked female slacks-wearers, “Why rub it in?”\textsuperscript{xxiv} Gorham was correct that many men’s dislike of women in slacks was
rooted in fears about gender boundary erasure and what that would mean for their comfortable masculine dominance after the war. She was also correct that many men mocked women in slacks, or treated them differently depending on whether they were wearing slacks or a skirt. In an issue of Ladies’ Home Journal, Groucho Marx wrote in, “I wish women would keep out of slacks! I’m a sucker for nylons, high-heeled shoes, dresses, peekabo waists and no hats, but if a woman must wear pants, let is be those that are worn under dresses.”xxv Another man wrote in to the magazine asking, “Why do women who take all the slack out of slacks insist on wearing them?”xxvi These comments not only reveal male resentment of women in slacks, but also the persistence of sex consciousness in apparel and the pervasiveness of the ideal body image for women.

On the other hand, Elizabeth Hawes’ perception was that men’s opinions of slacks tended towards the positive. Her comments, directed towards women who were hesitant to wear slacks because of the unfavorable opinions of men, attempted to change women’s minds by focusing on how slacks could increase their sexual attractiveness. However, her opinion was in the minority. Hawes, a fashion designer turned ordnance worker, contended, “Most of the men said the women all looked younger and more attractive in their sloppy work clothes than they did in their regular clothes. As for the women who complain about wearing slacks, if might be well for them to consider that it’s kind of exciting for the guys to see a lot of females looking entirely different from the normal routine of silk stocking and high heel. Nothing like changing your type from time to time if you want to get attention, girls.”xxvii Practicality and comfort, or even individual self-expression, were less important considerations for a woman when getting dressed than how she would look to men.
How women were treated in public depending on whether they were wearing slacks or skirts reveals a great deal about constructions of femininity and social order. Melissa McEuen argues, “Trousers marked millions of women during the war, opening the floodgates of anger and resentment by those who could not abide gender role redefinition in such a public manner.” Negative reactions from both men and women towards women in slacks reflected more than just fragile masculinity. Women sometimes resented other women who wore slacks and treated them as second-class citizens, even while the government and the media worked tirelessly to promote the image of the glorified woman war worker. Constance Bowman and C.M. Allen wrote at length in their combined memoir about the indignation they felt at being treated differently in their factory uniforms than in their civilian clothes. “It was bad enough,” they recalled, “being tired all the time and dirty most of the time, but worst of all the first week was having to go to work in slacks - down Fourth Street where people who knew us acted as if they didn’t, or down Third Street where people who didn’t know us whistled as if they did.” Wearing their Consolidated Aircraft uniforms, the women were frustrated that they could not get service at their favorite stores, make reservations at a ticket office, or get information at the post office. (67-68) But the worst treatment they received was from men:

“In one way, we were not women at all as far as they were concerned - if having them give us their seats on a crowded bus or stand aside to let us pass or pick up something we dropped meant that we were women. In another way, we were definitely women to them - “skirts” is the old-fashioned term, although it isn’t appropriate today… Men grabbed us and followed us and whistled at us. They called us “Sister” in a most unbrotherly way and “Baby” in a most unfatherly way… It was a great shock to C.M.
and me to find that being a lady depended more upon our clothes than upon ourselves… This summer we found out that it was not our innate dignity that protected us from unwelcome attention, but our trim suits, big hats, white gloves, and spectator pumps. Clothes, we reflected sadly, make the woman - and some clothes make the man think he can make the woman.\textsuperscript{xxx}

The contradictory treatment the two women received from men shows that simply wearing slacks made them both appear less feminine (unworthy of the regular chivalrous behavior they were used to), and more feminine (ostensibly more sexually available). Constance and C.M. felt annoyed that soldiers, sailors, and Marines on the bus never gave up seats to them while they were wearing their uniforms, but always gave up seats to women in skirts, including the company nurse, “all in spotless white which she tried to keep as far as possible from our dusty blue.” Another woman on the bus, who “squeaked like a talking doll” also got a seat. Constance concluded, “She always got a seat; and since it could not be because she was lady-like, beautiful, or intelligent, we decided it must be because she wore a skirt.”\textsuperscript{xxxvi} The women decided to perform a social experiment: “On our first Sunday off, just to reassure ourselves that it was the slacks and not us, we put on our bright linen suits, our highest heels, our whitest gloves, and our biggest hats and went for a ride on the Point Loma bus. And when three sailors, two marines, a soldier, and even two ensigns rose to offer us their seats, we said “Thank you!” as if we were used to such attention - and we took the ensigns’ seats!”\textsuperscript{xxxvii}

In stories like these, it becomes obvious how slacks could radically alter the way a woman was presented and received publicly.\textsuperscript{xxxviii} Slacks and skirts were not interchangeable: they were imbued with very different messages about class, sexuality,
and gender roles. Slacks had also particular significance to the negotiation of women’s gender and professional roles during the war because of their uniqueness. While the majority of American women were still wearing skirts, slacks set female defense workers apart from the civilian crowd. Public flouting of gender roles, even within the acceptable context of a defense job, made women in slacks susceptible to judgment and criticism merely for what they were wearing.

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i Campbell, *Women at War with America*, 77
ii McEuen, *Making War, Making Women*, 153
iv Ibid., 91
v Ibid., 150
viii McEuen, *Making War, Making Women*, 150
xii Ibid., 52
xiii Ibid., 50
xviii Weatherford, *American Women and World War II*, 146
xxviii Ibid., 152
xxviii McEuen, *Making War, Making Women*, 153
xxix Bowman and Allen, *Slacks and Calluses*, 67
Elizabeth Hawes also had a similar experience, which she wrote about in her wartime book "Why Women Cry, or Wenches with Wrenches." She recalled, "I got on the bus in my overalls, with my defense workers badge pinned on the edge of my collar. And as I walked down the bus toward them [the Woman’s Club, a group of women who...met once a month to go into New York to the theatre], toward the only empty seat, which was near them, they stopped talking. They stared at me. They sighed. When I sat down, one of them pulled herself together and said, “WELL! A defense worker!” She laughed. “If we aren't careful,” she said loudly and clearly, “we’ll soon have to be hanging out our own laundry.” (Hawes, 29-30) Slacks were also seen as a marker of a lower-class job, as seen in the memoir “Hit the Rivet Sister!” (56).
Hair and The Safety Campaign

Another manifestation of the tension between the demands of industrial work and the expression of femininity was women’s hair. While job safety required that women pull back and cover their hair, the 1940s ideal of feminine beauty included long, flowing tresses. Government and media safety campaigns to convince women to cover their hair on the factory floor reflected special, gender-specific treatment of women in the workplace that further deepened the gap between “masculine” and “feminine” that had started with slacks. Historian Donna Knaff writes, “Women walked the boundary lines of masculinity and femininity, often attempting to demark which “feminine” hallmarks to retain despite their “masculine” jobs.”¹ But when there were no other “feminine hallmarks” to retain, women often chose their hair as the primary marker of femininity, despite the dangers it posed.

Movie star Veronica Lake, known for her long, glamorous hair, was co-opted into the effort by the government via the media to get female defense workers to cover their hair. She was part of a publicity campaign that highlighted the dangers of long hair around factory equipment, posing for pictures with a grimace of pain as her hair got “caught” in a machine. As part of the campaign, Lake actually cut off her own famous long locks. The goal of this move was to send a message to women that short hair was now in vogue, which the government hoped would inspire women workers to follow suit and shear their crowning glory.² The effort was less than successful. The use of movie stars and celebrities in an effort produce a certain behavior in the public was not new to the advertising world of wartime media; however, this particular campaign had darker undertones. Having loose hair on the factory floor was a very real and serious danger for
women. But, many women were extremely hesitant to cut off their hair or even cover it under a safety cap.

To further complicate the matter, factory policies about covering hair were often in conflict with government and media messages. Enforcement of hair-covering rules was extremely difficult due to both women’s and men’s attitudes. Many of the messages directed at women were rooted in ideas about female gender identity and women’s proper role in society. The messages women received about their hair from the government and media often conflicted with messages from their supervisors and bosses. Mainstream media told women to cover their hair at all times for safety reasons, reassuring them that they would be still feminine even without their hair showing. Women’s male coworkers and supervisors often told them something else. While most employers stuck to government mandates and attempted to require all women to cover their hair as part of their work uniform, enforcement of these rules varied from factory to factory depending on the attitudes of the men in charge and of the women working there. Elizabeth Hawes recalled that she and her fellow workers “were admonished by one instructor that women have no place in a machine shop - and another instructor busied himself persuading the females they would lose their femininity if they wore slacks. By the time we were told to report to the plant, all but two of the wenches in the class were stalking about the machines in high heels, silk stockings, knitted fascinators, and little bows in their hair.”

Though her description is comical, using the term “wenches” to poke fun at her peers’ air-headedness, Hawes illustrates a real problem many women had when they faced conflicting messages about how to display their femininity.
Across the country, factory employers experienced great difficulty in getting women to cover their hair. At the 1943 National Safety Congress, almost all the employers present reported hair-covering issues. Managers attempted to deal with the problem by persuading women that their appearance at work would not suffer if they kept their hair concealed. Appeals to women’s supposed vanity like this one was a common tactic taken up by frustrated male employers, as they did with slacks. In the factory where Constance Bowman and C.M. Allen worked, the women workers were horrified when their foreman announced that all women must wear caps that cover all their hair, or risk being sent home. They tried to reason with him to allow them to wear turbans or bandanas, but he was adamant and tried to appeal to their vanity in order to get them to wear the caps by saying, “Why, I just saw a little girl who looked so cute in her cap that I was tempted to ask her for a date!” The women remained unconvinced. A worker named Lindy bemoaned, “Why the boys won’t even look at us now!” However, sending women home for not covering their hair caused problems with production, and eventually the men in charge realized three things: “It was impossible 1) to get the girls in caps, 2) to keep them in caps, 3) to make them put their hair under the caps - unless the foremen were willing to devote all of their time to achieve these three things.”

Women’s resistance to covering their hair was so great in this case that it caused enough problems with production to actually get the women what they wanted: some control over their appearance.

Despite safety concerns (and very real danger of being scalped) women pushed back with great force against all mandates to cover their hair. In one factory, posters that had been put up in the locker rooms of a woman who had been scalped by a machine were “scornfully” torn down by women who continued to wear their hair down or...
uncovered. Women often found clever and innovate ways to evade hair-covering rules. In the aircraft factory where Constance and C.M. worked, women wore all types of accessories on their heads, with varying degrees of protectiveness. Constance recalled, “The only really effective hair coverings were worn by the girls who came to work with their hair in curlers. All other coverings were such in name only, definitely enhancing to woman’s crowning glory, which was usually swooped up on top of the head in a complex arrangement of combs, curls and flowers… or spread out in its full length and beauty under the doubtful protection of a colorful chiffon square with two ends tied underneath the hair and the other two above.” She remarked sagely that, “Any woman could understand why with a choice between beauty and safety, she would take beauty.” In choosing beauty over safety, women sent a powerful message about the social forces that caused them to make that decision.

Women’s desire to look “ladylike” at the expense of their own safety was interpreted by their male supervisors and the male-dominated media as vanity, foolishness, obstinacy, lack of patriotism, and – even more damaging – proof that women did not belong in the defense industry. A pamphlet directed towards male supervisors advised, “A woman’s hair is her crowning glory and most of those who wear their hair long will refuse to bob it for safety’s sake… A woman, whether or not you think she has the physical attributes of a goddess, considers her physical charms of face and figure necessary implements to her livelihood and happiness. This has been true since Eve won the admiration of Adam and nothing in this war will serve to change it.” Women needed to be provided with every possible form of protection for their faces and bodies, because those were essential to their success in life and they would be better workers if they were
not worried about being disfigured. xi The New York Times said of women workers, “Concern about their personal appearance makes them reluctant to wear safety equipment - particularly goggles and caps that hide their hair - in spite of the danger of accidents.” xii Men’s reactions to women’s hair expressed serious contradictions: at the same time as they expected women to look feminine at work, they called women frivolous and vain for caring about looking feminine at work. The double standard imposed here made it even more difficult for women to navigate expectations for how to present themselves in the workplace.

To women themselves, their insistence on displaying their hair told a very different story. As discussed in the previous section, women often found ways to bend the rules on safety clothing and make themselves look more feminine at work. However, in many cases women were unable to do this and were required to wear masculine-styled or actual men’s clothing day in and day out. When clothing was no longer an option for displaying femininity, women turned to hair. Elaborate hairstyles or feminine adornments like flowers and combs accentuated the fact that the woman wearing them, though her body was concealed within men’s clothing, was still a woman. Hair was one of the few available options for women war workers to balance their gender identity as women with their professional identity as defense workers. Striking a balance between these two identities was, to thousands of women, more important than concerns about their safety.

Why was striking this balance so important? One possible explanation, especially in the case of young, unmarried women workers, was the desire for marriage. The prevailing ideal in American society was of marriage and children, and this ideal only increased in potency during the unstable war years. However, “in a marriage-oriented but male-scarce
society, getting and retaining male attention and approval became an even greater preoccupation for many girls and women than it had been before the war. Another explanation is fear of negative backlash from male coworkers and supervisors, female coworkers and peers, family members, and society in general. Women war workers were subject to disrespect and discrimination when wearing their uniforms in public, sexual harassment on the job, ridicule in the media, and rejection by a traditional-minded public. Many of the criticisms of women workers were based on fears about women’s sexual power, independence, and rejection of the conventional domestic role of women in society. By displaying their hair, women could visibly mark themselves as “feminine” and hopefully avoid censure for rejecting their “true” role and “keep sexuality safety circumscribed.” As the war went on and more women filled men’s jobs and occupied male spaces, how women chose to present themselves became more and more important.

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ii McEuen *Making War, Making Women*, 167; Campbell, *Women at War with America*, 123
iii Hawes, *Why Women Cry*, 60
iv Campbell, *Women at War with America*, 123
v Bowman and Allen, *Slacks and Calluses*, 155-156
vi Ibid., 163
vii 9 percent of the injuries in shipyards occurred as a direct consequence of women’s failure to wear safe attire. (Campbell, *Women at War with America*, 123); More people died in industrial accidents during the war than battlefield casualties (R.H. Bailey, *The Home Front USA*, 1977). See several stories in Wise & Wise *A Mouthful of Rivets* for stores of industrial accidents due to lack of safety clothing or inability to follow hair-covering safety rules.
ix Bowman and Allen, *Slacks and Calluses*, 157
x Ibid., 159
xiii Anderson, *Wartime Women*, 77
xiv McEuen, *Making War, Making Women*, 156
Female Sexuality and Public Image: The Sweater Girls

In addition to issues with their slacks and hair, women in the defense industry faced another challenge when deciding how to present themselves each day: how much to display their sexuality. These women walked a fine line of sexuality – on one side, they risked looking too masculine and not appealing enough, and on the other side, too feminine and too appealing. The fears that government leaders and factory employers held about female sexuality in war plants were based primarily on how women looked. In contrast, female soldiers were criticized more for their sexual behavior (whether fabricated or not), rather than their appearance. The difference in the public’s reaction to women’s sexuality in the military versus the defense industry was due to differences in the integration of women into these two formerly masculine fields. One of the greatest variations in this integration was women’s degree of interaction with men. As opposed to the sexual segregation that existed in the military with women forming separate all-female corps, women who took jobs in the defense industry worked alongside men every day. Often, especially at the beginning of the war, women were vastly outnumbered by men in factories. In the military, as discussed in the previous chapter, rumors of female homosexuality and prostitution for the male Army existed concurrently. These rumors were brought about by male fears of the power of female sexuality to replace men in a situation in which women were living and working closely with other women without the presence of men. Both genres of slander were reactions to male fears of female sexual dominance, and attempts to mitigate women’s power and agency by reducing them to sexual objects.
In the defense industry, women worked alongside men doing the same or similar jobs, eight or more hours a day, six or more days per week. This is an important distinction, because women in the military frequently worked in a largely female workplace, and mostly doing clerical work which men were not doing. Though servicewomen’s role as “soldier” was masculine, the actual work they were doing was usually conceptualized as feminine. By contrast, the factory floor was a hyper-masculinized space and the manual labor done by women in the defense industry was viewed as inherently masculine. This led to a very different set of problems with female sexuality in the workplace, though reflecting similar male hegemonic views about women’s sexuality and proper place in society. Because of women’s increased proximity with men, fears about female sexuality centered around its effect on men. Male factory employers worried about the effect women’s presence in the previously male defense industry would have on morale and production. The strongest of those concerns was of the power of female sexuality to demoralize or distract men from their work, causing production delays and leading to accidents or injuries. But criticism was rarely focused on women’s actual sexual behavior, but rather on their presentation of sexuality. This led to a campaign against “Sweater Girls,” seen in many factory policies, governmental missives, and media images.

The idea of the “Sweater Girl” came out of a Hollywood trend of photographing actresses in “sweater shots,” in which “the breasts of women are clearly outlined and emphasized.”i The trend reached far beyond Hollywood, from Wellesley co-eds to female factory employees. Tight-fitting sweaters were popular throughout the war, “satisfying some Americans while upsetting others.”ii The key aspect of the “Sweater Girl” image
was not the sweater itself, but the sexualized female figure on display to the public. Such an appearance created complications in the workplace, which mirrored male fears about female sexual power. The issue of the “Sweater Girl” on the factory floor reveals yet another way in which women were confronted with the dilemma of double consciousness and the difficulty in regulating it.

Elizabeth Hawes sarcastically remarked in her memoir, “Maybe the management thinks the male workers would cut off their hands inadvertently if female workers were allowed to wear sweaters or plaid shirts or overalls or even skirts.” There was a very real fear that women in factories wearing any type of clothing that revealed the fact that they were, indeed, women, would cause mayhem for the male workers. One 1942 government report suggested to factory employers, “Lay down the law... no sweaters allowed. If a pulchritudinous girl wears one she can demoralize the plant in ten minutes. Not only will the men have a hard time making their eyes behave but the other women will rise up in indignation.” The blame here is squarely placed upon women for choosing to wear supposedly “provocative” clothing like sweaters. Not only are such women presented as a danger to the men in the plant, but they could cause other women to become jealous or offended (because, according to male opinion, women are always inherently in competition with one another).

The solution, according to the government and many employers, was to strictly regulate women’s work clothing. Clothing codes were “often spelled out not so much for the protection of the woman being regulated, but rather for the man who worked with her. BusinessWeek argued for uniformed factory women by saying, ‘tight sweaters, snug slacks, and feminine artifices of color and style were distracting influences involving equal
hazard to the men.’ *Time* reported regretfully, ‘No problems like these bothered factory managers a year ago. But now perhaps, a very shapely sweater girl wanders in to take her place in the swing shift. Low whistles follow her as she ambles down the aisle between machines.’ The thought seemed never to occur to men in the government, male employers, or male editors that men’s reactions to the presence of a woman next to them could be the responsibility of men themselves. Uniforms provided an easy answer to the “Sweater Girl” problem. In her memoir, Ann Pendleton recalled that in the factory she worked, there was always a rumor that the women were going to be put into uniform – “if we are, I’m told, ‘it’s them there sweater girls is why.’” She recalled that if a woman wore a sweater to work, the “fellers” upon seeing her would whistle and call out, “Keep ‘em flying!”

The close proximity of men and women in factories led to more direct forms of sexual harassment, like the instance described above, than most women in the military experienced. This was further heightened by the image of female factory workers as sexually available because they were wearing slacks. Many women interviewed after the war reported issues with sexual harassment – however, these were never dealt with properly on an official level, and women often had to resort to their own means to ensure their safety in the workplace. Historians Nancy and Christy Wise, in their collection of women’s oral histories from World War II, write, “An almost equal number of women were treated with respect and offered assistance as those who encountered discrimination, propositions, catcalls, or derogatory remarks.” Factory policies intended to curtail sexual harassment often focused more on women’s appearance than men’s behavior. By making women look almost identical to men through shapeless, unisex uniforms,
some employers hope to discourage harassment. “Typical solutions to sexual harassment… were to design uniforms that made women indistinguishable from men and to hire ‘gray-haired factory chaperones’ to ‘catch’ distracting women ‘in the ladies’ room’ and advise them on disguising their appearance.”

The conflicting messages sent to women here are baffling: on the one hand, women were told constantly by the media to make themselves look beautiful and feminine. On the other hand, they were advised by their superiors at work to “disguise” their womanly appearance in order to avoid sexual harassment. Again here, women had to walk the very thin boundary between looking feminine enough to prove they were conforming to gender roles, and looking too feminine and provoking the sexual desires of men to the point of harassment or assault. Balancing their double roles as worker and woman and policing their own appearance was further complicated by clothing regulations set by employers and the government.

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i McEuen, Making War, Making Women, 172  
ii Ibid., 173  
iii Hawes, Why Women Cry, 92  
iv McEuen, Making War, Making Women, 173  
v Weatherford, American Women in World War II, 147  
vi Pendleton, Hit the Rivet Sister, 58  
vii Wise and Wise, A Mouthful of Rivets, 88  
viii Weatherford, American Women in World War II, 147
Media Representations of Women Ordnance Workers

The government and industry leaders faced a number of difficulties in recruiting women to war work, which they coopted the mass media to ameliorate. A recruitment brochure from early in the war entitled “Womanpower” illustrated what government officials and factory employers thought were the problems: “Womanpower is a headache because… it involves a complete dislocation of normal routine. Consequently most women neither understand it nor like it… men even less. Therefore it is essential to establish the fact that not only is it necessary for women to work, but it is an entirely normal procedure under a wartime economy, and convince men as well as women that… the more women at work the sooner we'll win.” In addition to the disruption of normal life, the government and industrial leaders recognized that the resistance of men to women working was a major obstacle to overcome in getting women into factory jobs. The focus on the “normalcy” of women working, in addition to the wartime necessity, underscores fears about what is considered “abnormal” for women. A woman working outside the home was seen by many Americans as abnormal because the traditional “proper” place for women was in the home, performing the duties of wife, mother, and homemaker. These deeply entrenched ideas could not be overcome in the short amount of time available to mobilize American women for war work. Therefore, ideas about traditional womanhood were not disproved or erased, but rather adapted to fit the current needs of the wartime defense industry.

Women themselves were often resistant to the idea of taking a defense job. In a poll by the American Institute of Public Opinion, 40% of women responded that they were unwilling to take a job in a war plant. 42% of childless women aged 20 to 34 were willing
to take a job, but only 16% of mothers were willing to do so. In the age group 35-54, 33% of childless women were willing to go to work, but only 19% of mothers were. During the 1940s, motherhood was viewed as a full-time occupation and the ultimate goal for women to aspire to in life. Many women would work until marriage, upon which they would quit their jobs to begin their real career: starting and raising a family. Early recruitment efforts for the defense industry focused on single, childless women, but their numbers were quickly depleted. Recruiting married women and mothers to take factory jobs was a much greater challenge because it went against traditional ideas about what it meant to be a wife and mother. Women who were hesitant to take a factory job were also influenced by the men in their lives. There was a great deal of resistance from men to having their wives take defense jobs. In one poll, only 30% of men were willing to have their wives take a job in a defense factory, and 54% were unwilling. The media needed to convince husbands that it was not a negative mark on them that their wife was taking a job. In the process of doing so, the media reinforced traditional gender roles of the man as caretaker and provider and the woman as dependent.\textsuperscript{ii}

Media campaigns also confronted resistance to women's employment by men working in factories. The media often attempted to portray a harmonious relationship between male and female workers in factories, emphasizing male gallantry, treatment of women like mothers, daughters, or sisters, and reluctant men eventually being won over by the dedication and skill of women workers.\textsuperscript{iii} This approach was meant to lessen male resistance to women workers by undermining women's contributions to the factory or by couching their work in acceptably feminine terms. In a \textit{New York Times} article, writer Lucy Greenbaum stated, "The invasion of a heretofore masculine ménage by nail-polished
Another article entitled “First Girls at Navy Yard Like Their Jobs as Helpers” by Anne Petersen framed women as merely secondary “helpers” to the primary work of the male workers. Furthermore,

However, in reality things were much different: men were often very resistant to having women work alongside them, foremen refused to have women working under them, and gender discrimination prevailed. Ann Pendleton recalled a fellow worker named Walt who proclaimed, “What are no use, and never will be no use… are these here girls what never did no factory work afore, and come here just acause of the war.” Some men refused “point-blank” to have a female partner, making it difficult for women to gain experience and hone their skills. Pendleton wrote, “The attitude of the ‘fellers’ towards us females is a mixture of exasperation and indulgence… The ‘fellers’ live in a wonderful atmosphere of homage and appreciated superiority.” Men, by their nature, were automatically assumed to be more capable than women, making it more difficult for women to establish themselves on the factory floor and reinforcing traditional ideas of femininity. Many foremen retained such prejudices against women and, despite women’s best efforts to prove themselves capable, “did not want to have their minds changed.” Men who believed in the stereotypical portrait of woman as a weak, passive, and emotional being saw no place for this creature in the defense industry. To confront these prejudices, the traditional view of womanhood had to be reshaped to fit the current needs. A balancing act between masculine and feminine traits was required to reach this goal.

As with the military, the media faced a similar problem of how to balance femininity and masculinity in images of women ordnance workers. Sociologist Tawyna J. Adkins
Covert writes, "Mobilization campaigns assured a concerned public that even though a woman may be doing a man’s job, she remained feminine and attractive underneath her overalls. She worried about how she would look in her uniform, she painted her nails and wore makeup on the assembly line, and wanted nothing more than to see the return of nylons." Many newspaper and magazine stories about women factory workers mentioned how often they went to "touch up" in the powder room and described in detail how their makeup and nail polish looked. Makeup was an easy way for women to look feminine without sacrificing safety, and so women religiously applied lipstick, powder, and blush every day. The wartime ideal was "a woman feminized enough to be conventionally attractive (but not so attractive as to be distracting), and masculinized enough to be efficient (and make sure her husband is, too)." This ideal was constantly represented in the media, and women were constantly trying to attain it.

The media also put a great deal of emphasis on the fashionable aspect of the woman worker. There were dozens of reports of WOW fashion shows in newspapers as prestigious as *The New York Times*, showing pictures of designer overalls and slacks that were marketed flattering and feminine. These articles idealized the woman worker as another type of fashion plate, just like recruitment literature did for the woman soldier. In reality, most actual working women did not wear these fashionable, expensive get-ups. They either wore men’s clothes, borrowed from husbands and boyfriends, mandatory factory uniforms, or some combination of their regular clothing and factory-appropriate pieces. It was the rare woman who wore the designer “workwear” featured in magazines to actually work in.

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1 "Womanpower," Box 5, Folder 174, Women in World War II Pamphlets, Vault 940.53, W87p. Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
By referring to women as “girls” (which was an extremely common occurrence in articles about both women ordnance workers and women in the military) the writers infantilized women to make them appear less threatening to men. This was not just done by men, but by women writers too, as was the case in this particular article. Women referred to themselves and other women with belittling language that reinforced their gender identity and lessened their threat to gender role divisions. This tendency to call women “girls” also carried over into everyday life for women working in factories. Ann Pendleton recalled, “Females are usually “girls,” sometimes “ladies,” never “women.”” (Pendleton, 60).

There were many negative portrayals of working mothers in the media, based in the fear that women who held jobs outside the home would not be content to simply stay at home and raise children. In reality, there was very little support for working mothers from the government or from the companies where women worked. The government left childcare up to individual communities, and though a few companies did attempt to create designated childcare facilities for their employees’ children, the idea did not become widespread. There was also a stigma against daycare that prevented women from putting their children in the care of other people. In addition to finding someone to care for their children while they were at work, working mothers faced the additional burden of working two full time jobs. After a full day working at the war plant, women were still expected to do the shopping, cook for their families, clean the house, and perform all other household responsibilities they held before the war. Without access to modern devices like washing machines and dryers, simply doing the laundry for the house could take hours or even an entire day. Little help or special dispensations were given to women to aid them in doing this double duty. This led to major absenteeism issues for women who had no other choice but to skip work in order to finish all of the household chores they were expected to do. (For more information see: “The Margin is Now Womanpower,” New York Times “16,000,000 Women at Work”, and Hit the Rivet Sister by Ann Pendleton)
Conclusion

Though there was greater variation and freedom of choice in women’s defense industry uniforms, they reflected similar tensions to women’s military uniforms. Slacks revealed the contradictions between expectations of how women should appear in public and the requirements of their jobs. Since the WOWs needed to wear slacks for safety reasons, greater effort was required on their part to publicly display their femininity and reinforce their conformity to gender roles despite their masculine clothing and jobs. Women’s hair, though still regulated by uniform rules, became a key negotiating point between their gender and professional identities. Backlash against female ordnance workers was often centered on their appearance, and women had to strike a delicate balance between looking too masculine and too sexual.
IV. CONCLUSION

“Forties clothes were truly sexy - those swingy little dresses in soft, flowered rayon prints with shoulder pads had a jaunty, competent femininity. Fifties clothes were like armor. Our clothes expressed all the contradictions of our roles. Our ridiculously starched skirts and hobbling sheaths were a caricature of femininity. Our cinched waists and aggressively pointed breasts advertised our availability at the same time they warned of our impregnability. In the daytime we wore tight, revealing sweaters, but they were topped by mincing little Peter Pan collars and perky scarves that seemed to say, “Who, me? Why, I’m just a little girl!” At night our shoulders were naked, our breasts half-bare, the lower half of our bodies hidden in layers of tulle. Underneath it all, our flesh, like our volatile sexuality, was “contained” by boned girdles and Merry Widows, in an era when “containment” was a political as well as a social obsession.”

Women soldiers and ordnance workers during World War II faced many similar challenges when attempting to present a public image which conformed to the standards of appropriate feminine appearance. Both groups of women had their apparel controlled by predominantly male authorities, and they had to find creative ways to express their individuality and femininity within the confines of uniform regulations. The regulations were more stringent for military women, but those women also had a built-in safety net of femininity to fall back upon: their uniforms included skirts. Female defense workers, on the other hand, had the additional challenge of maintaining their femininity while wearing slacks, which were considered men’s clothing. The importance of hair for defense workers was therefore increased, because it was one of the few avenues available to those women to display their femininity publicly. Both groups of women were expected to embody a prescriptive femininity, and at the same time expected to adopt traditionally masculine traits to prove their worth in their new male-dominated professions. The balancing act women performed between those two sets of expectations was a delicate, and near-impossible, one.
The backlash both groups of women received, particularly from men, reveals the persistence of the challenge of double consciousness, despite the best efforts of the government, the media, and women themselves to regulate it. The negative treatment female defense workers received when wearing slacks in public shows the strength of the connection between slacks and maleness. When women broke that connection by wearing slacks themselves, they were perceived to be crossing gender boundaries. Though military women did not face this particular criticism, they received public backlash centered on their sexuality. The slander campaign against the women’s services which painted all servicewomen as sexually promiscuous underlines male fears about female sexual power and independence, as well as an inability or refusal to see women outside of a sexual role. Male industry leaders also feared female sexuality in the sexually integrated factory environment, and attempted to regulate it through women’s clothing. Women soldiers and defense workers were both unable to negotiate between their feminine role and their professional, masculine role adequately enough to eliminate criticism because they were working against impossible odds. The line they walked was so thin, it was barely visible at all.

At the end of the war, many women, whether by choice or by force, left their jobs in factories and on military bases and returned to working as salesgirls, typists, and teachers, or simply returned home to get married and start families. The popular characterization of the postwar period as the era of the housewife is a misconception: while the American housewife did replace Rosie the Riveter as the new media darling, during the 1950s women were joining the workforce in ever-growing numbers. Brett Harvey, author of The Fifties: A Women’s Oral History, writes, “Rosie the Riveter didn’t
necessarily leave the work force; she just moved - or was moved… While the growing numbers of women working outside the home did not alter the balance of power within the family, or directly challenge assumptions about women’s roles, it meant that the realities of women’s lives were being transformed. "While women were joining the workforce in record numbers, they were not usually in competition with men for jobs, allowing the patriarchal system of male dominance to continue uncontested. But Harvey is correct in noticing that, despite the continuity of gender roles, women’s lives were indeed changing, and they were changing to fit the new ideal womanhood embodied in the American housewife.

The paradox of the mass migration of women back to the home and the upward trend of women in the workforce reflects new challenges in balancing womanhood and professional identity in the postwar years. Without wartime necessity, women were no longer welcome in the masculine professions of the military and industry, and their uniforms were no longer deemed acceptable attire. When the majority of women soldiers and defense workers left those jobs, they no longer faced the challenges that accompanied being a woman in a uniform which publicly identified her with a masculine profession. However, the dilemma of double consciousness, which had plagued women from their first steps into the public sphere, did not disappear, because femininity still remained a topic of public interest and debate. When the regulation of women's appearance by the military and industry abated, it was replaced by equally potent media messages about how women should present themselves publicly. The government and the media continued to agonize over how women should look when entering the workforce and how they should strike the balance between looking too masculine and too
sexual. Magazines continued to advise women, with messages just as contradictory as during the war, on how to properly present their femininity in public. Though uniforms were no longer a part of this equation, the rules governing how a woman should dress and present herself were as complex as ever.

Making the Change Back to Civilian Clothing

During World War II, fashion designers conformed to the traditional military emphasis on shoulders and broadened the shoulders of women’s uniforms, conveying an image of heightened masculinity. The attention given to shoulders in traditional military dress expresses an image of masculinity because biologically, broad shoulders are a secondary sex characteristic of men. This design trend was not only applied to the uniforms of the women’s services but also to women’s factory uniforms and to civilian clothing. When the war was over, fashion designers “quickly reverted to the former ‘more natural’ style,” de-emphasizing women’s shoulders in favor of busts and hips. Christian Dior pioneered his “New Look” in 1947, a resurgence of constrictive and hyper-feminine styles, and lamented wartime fashion as “a period of uniforms, of soldier-women with shoulders like boxers.” The “New Look” was characterized by full skirts and nipped-in waists, emulating the corseted figure of the Victorian years. Dior’s dismissal of the masculine-inspired styles women wore during the war and of uniforms themselves was based in ideas about traditional femininity and what women “should” look like. His opinions corresponded with many Americans’ ideals and fears about women’s proper role and dress, which had been heightened by the presence of millions of uniformed women during the war. The styles
Dior created became wildly popular, not just for their aesthetic value, but for what they communicated about gender roles.

At the end of the war, women were expected to shed their uniforms and go back to wearing more feminine civilian clothing, and to place significance on those civilian clothes. Even further, women were expected to give up their jobs and positions in the military and industry and return to the traditionally feminine occupations (and paychecks) they held before the war. This was done to maintain the status quo of gender relations when millions of men returned from the war overseas, shifting the balance of power back towards men.

In the Navy newsletter “The Golden Gater,” the section “Crew’s Views” included interviews with service men and women. In an issue from November 1945, the writers asked men and women what they planned to spend their “mustering-out” pay on. WAVE Mary E. Twitchwell replied, “A good initial wardrobe is a big item for many of the girls returning to civilian life.” Many military women expected to spend most of their mustering-out money on new “civvies,” an essential step in refashioning themselves as appropriately feminine civilian women. In a *New York Times* article, former WAVE Virginia Gundlacher Sexton proclaimed, “Though we’re proud of our uniforms, we won’t wear Navy blue for years after getting out of service. Only gay colors for us, with the most flower-bedecked, feather-trimmed, be-veiled bonnets.” Not only did military women have to buy a new civilian wardrobe, they were expected to want to dress themselves in the most feminine styles after years of wearing serious colors and masculine tailoring. The emphasis on feminine frills was present throughout the war as women attempted to display their femininity; this focus only increased after the war as women struggled to readjust their former professional identity to their new civilian identity.
Even the postwar styles of military uniforms were subject to the growing influence of the “New Look.” Out were the masculine-inspired uniforms, and in were long, full skirts that emphasized the hips and waist, giving the wearer an hourglass figure. This change could be interpreted merely as the military keeping up with current fashions, or it can be understood as a move towards constraining women even further in order to keep sexuality circumscribed and maintain gender boundaries that may have been blurred during the war. Recruitment materials for the women’s military in the 1950s and 1960s emphasized fashion and appearance even more than they did during the war. One recruitment pamphlet for the WAC from the fifties entitled “Somebody Special” reads more like a fashion magazine than an actual military publication. It features an eternally smiling redheaded girl named Barbara with perfectly lacquered red lips and a trim uniform that emphasizes her slender, yet curvy, figure. She is shown going about her activities as a WAC recruit, which include socializing, modeling her uniform for each season, standing daintily next to an American flag, and not much else. This pamphlet’s silence on the actual work done by the WACs and their outstanding service during World War II speaks volumes. Women soldiers were feminized to such a degree that the fact they are soldiers is not even mentioned – they are women, first, foremost, and completely.

When women left behind their jobs in the defense industry, they too were expected to leave behind their uniform slacks and overalls. In the media and government or industry pamphlets, women often exclaimed how much they longed to wear frilly dresses and feathered hats after the war was over and how they would never touch a pair of slacks again. This type of propagandistic text was meant to convince women to drop their masculine attire and conform to the prescriptive image of feminine beauty. In reality, many
women had come to enjoy wearing slacks, appreciating the freedom of movement they
had in them. Though the “New Look” became the primary fashion trend of the moment,
many women refused to retire their slacks for good and continued wearing them casually.
Doris Weatherford argues about women in slacks during World War II, “This
transformation in dress represented a serious and permanent change in women’s roles.
Wearing male clothing was indeed a genuine liberation for women - brought about,
ironically, by a need to conform.” The liberation women experienced in slacks had greater
staying power in the postwar period than many of the other gains made during the war,
like equal pay for equal work. Ladies’ Home Journal Fashion Editor Wilhela Cushman
predicted as early as May 1942, “The wearing of pants in factories will have its effect on
fashion throughout the nation - we’ll see more women in slacks and trousers.” However,
the days of millions of women going to work in slacks were over for the time being,
signifying a shift in women’s employment trends and the establishment of a new set of
rules on how to properly display femininity.

The Long-Term Legacy of the Wartime Era

One of the most enduring legacies of World War II was the permanent official presence
of women in the U.S. military. The Women’s Armed Services Act of 1948 gave permanent
status to women in all the armed forces; however, the act capped those numbers at a
paltry 2% service-wide. An article in Time described the mustering-out of thousands of
women: “Almost half the Coast Guard’s 10,000 SPARs are already out of uniform; the
rest will be gone by midsummer. The Coast Guard plans no permanent women's
reserve...The Marine Corps is scarcely more enthusiastic: half the 18,000 "Lady Leathernecks" have gone back to civilian life. Little more than a corporal's guard will be kept on after September—enough to do the paper work for an inactive reserve.³xxxiii Though their numbers were drastically reduced, women had still won a crucial victory by making their presence in the military a permanent fixture.

The postwar period is characterized by contradictions. One of the most well-known legacies of the World War II period was the Baby Boom. However, the paradox of that phenomenon for women is rarely recognized in popular knowledge. At the same time as marriage and birthrates soared, the number of women working outside the home also increased. From 1950 to 1955, the female labor force went from 16 million to 22 million, surpassing wartime highs.³xiv Though conventionally the work rate for women is inversely related to the presence of children, from 1940 to 1956 high fertility rates coexisted with increased work rates for women.³ xv The numbers of married women in the workforce also increased dramatically. Only 16.7% of the female workforce in 1940 was married; in 1950, this number had gone up to 24.8%, and by 1960 it was 31.7%, firmly establishing an upward trend that continued through the 20th century.³vi

There was also a contradiction between media messages extolling the virtues of home life and women’s desire to make marriage their sole career, and women’s actual employment rates. In a Ladies’ Home Journal article from 1945 entitled “Career Woman,” writer Judy Barry remarks: “Perhaps you’ve wondered, you young wives... what you ought to do... when Johnnie comes home again and you can really begin to live your marriage. In many cases there won’t be the smallest question in your mind. Most of the young Army and Navy wives whom I know wear the dream of being at last in their own
homes, practicing the fine art of homemaking, wrapped around them like a cloak these
days. On the surface, it seems like the tone of Barry’s writing has shifted away from
the many articles during the war that encouraged women to leave the home and take
wartime jobs. However, the underpinnings of this new “cult of domesticity” existed well
before the end of the war. Women’s wartime work was framed as temporary from the start
of “the duration,” and there was an implicit expectation when they took war jobs that they
would give up that work as soon as the war was over. The centrality of women’s domestic
role and their desire to continue domestic pursuits was reinforced over and over again in
recruitment literature, the media, and in women’s own memoirs. In her memoir, WAVE
Joan Angel recalls what her father said to her when she returned home on furlough for
the first time: “I hate to think of what’s going to happen to all these women in uniform after
the war. You see, I still think a woman’s first job is to marry and raise children and build
a home.” Angel responds, “So do I. So do most of the girls I’ve met in the WAVES. More
than anything else, we want to marry and raise children and build a home. But before we
can do that, there’s a job to be done. When it’s done, when the men can come home
again, we’ll get out of these uniforms on the double-quick.” Getting out of uniform
symbolized giving up the masculine traits and privileges that were implicit in that uniform.
The assumption was that all women would be happy to shed their uniforms, and their
newfound confidence, assertiveness, and independence, immediately after the war was
won.

But this was an uneasy assumption. From the earliest moments that women joined
the war effort, there were questions about whether or not they would be willing to give up
their new jobs and economic independence once the war was over. An article by Mary
Anderson, Director of the Women’s Bureau, ran in *The New York Times* in July 1943 and asked “16,000,000 women at work: what will happen to them after the war?” Anderson acknowledged that many women would still need jobs after the war, and recommended full employment as the only solution to avoid another economic disaster like The Great Depression following World War I.*xix* In an even earlier article in *Ladies Home Journal*, writers Ruth Matthews and Betty Hannah jointly asked: “And when the war is over? Some of the girls, and certainly the men they work beside, wonder just what all these women are going to do when the boys come home. Some, of course, will quit to get married. But not all of them will have husbands, because some of the boys aren’t coming back... As for the younger girls, ‘When the war’s over we’ll probably go home again and wash dishes.’”*xx* There was tension between what women were expected to do and what they were actually doing after the war. The media sent dual messages to women, telling them they should be glad to give up their jobs to returning veterans and go back home, but also recognizing that many women still needed employment in order to survive. In an article in *Ladies’ Home Journal* from right before the end of the war, writer Nell Giles asked, “What about the women?” Of the “army of new women workers” she said, “If the American woman can find a man she wants to marry, who can support her, a job fades into insignificance beside the vital business of staying at home and raising a family... However, if she doesn’t marry, or the man she marries cannot support her and her children adequately, then she intends to fall into no position of helpless feminine dependency. She intends to use her new-found skills, her hard-won position, to earn money. She sees no reason to give up her job to a man, if she needs it equally.”*xxi* The empowered-yet-feminine woman Giles describes here combines the strong, self-
sufficient Rosie the Riveter figure of the war with the idealized housewife figure of postwar prosperity. Giles’ article acknowledges that this ideal is what all women should strive for, but not what all women could attain.

There was also continuity in the power of prescriptive femininity, though that femininity changed somewhat to reflect the new ideal womanhood represented by the American Housewife. The glorification of the home was a key feature of the cult of domesticity following the Second World War. Whereas during the war, the containment of women’s bodies was exemplified by uniforms, in the postwar era women’s lives, minds, and bodies were contained in the safe confines of wifehood and motherhood. Seventeen magazine began educating its readers at a young age about their expected role in 1950s society. In an article succinctly titled “How to Be a Woman,” the magazine warned that “being a woman is your career and you can’t escape it.” The article went on to explain that “there is no office, lab, or stage that offers so many creative avenues or executive opportunities as that everyday place, the home… What profession offers the daily joy of turning out a delicious dinner, of converting a few yards of fabric, a pot of paint, and imagination into a new room? Of seeing a tired and unsure man at the end of a working day become a rested lord of his manor?” Though the article concedes that women had dozens of career options open to them, it reinforces the idea that a woman’s biology is her destiny, and thus women could find complete fulfillment in domestic life. This ideology, so pervasive in 1950s society, seems like a sharp contrast from the messages sent to women during World War II urging them out of the home and into the war effort. However, the underlying message – that a woman’s femininity is her greatest form of personal value – was always there in the media’s portrayals of working women during the 1940s. The
power of prescriptive femininity, as conveyed to women by the media and reinforced by social values, is a key thread that ties together the wartime era with the postwar era.

Though women’s uniforms faded from the public eye after the end of World War II, the challenges they symbolized did not. Women did not shed the burden of double consciousness along with their uniforms. They continued to balance conflicting identities by altering their clothes and appearance to express an idealized femininity. Traditional ideas about how women should present themselves in public persisted into the postwar era, and were even heightened by the debut of Dior’s “New Look,” which was not really new at all. Though the numbers of women working in male professions like the military and heavy industry decreased, some women did remain in those jobs, and women’s presence in the workforce overall only continued to grow throughout 1950s and 1960s. The legacy of the WACs and Rosie the Riveter was a permanent presence for women in the military and the workforce, with which came the ongoing struggle for women to publicly embody both their feminine role and their professional role, which continues today.

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2 Ibid., xix.
8 “Somebody Special (WAC),” Women in World War II Pamphlets, Vault 940.53, W87p. Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
9 See Campbell, p. 124: “After we got used to wearing slacks, we’d take cold if we changed back to dresses, so I quit buying any dresses.”; “I won’t get out of them now and I’m not even working in the plant.”


Harvey, *The Fifties*, 128


Ibid., 7


Harvey, *The Fifties*, 73.
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Keep your **BEAUTY** on duty!

**Give your skin Ivory care, Doctors advise!**

1. **SHOULDERS:** Keep cool and clean. Take a cold shower at least once a day. Avoid hot baths. Use a little cream. Use a good soapsuds. Sun is not good for skin. Wrinkles will develop and you will lose your beauty.

2. **HAIR:** Keep it clean and healthy. Use a good hair care lotion. Use a good shampoo. Avoid heavy hair products.

3. **FACE:** Keep your face clean and clear. Use a good cleanser. Use a good moisturizer. Use a good sunscreen. Avoid heavy makeup.

4. **NAILS:** Keep your nails short and clean. Use a good nail polish. Avoid heavy nail polish.

5. **BODY:** Keep your body clean and healthy. Use a good underarm deodorant. Use a good body lotion. Avoid heavy body products.

**“Baby-care” is Beauty-care, use New Velvet-suds IVORY**

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