Women in the Military

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In this issue:
The Supreme Court decides the constitutionality of all-male selective service registration, as the Pentagon rolls back voluntary female recruitment. What role should women, as full and equal citizens, play in the defense of their nation? .............. p.1

Few professions are as mistrusted as the law. The reason may lie in essential conflicts between the professional responsibilities of lawyers and ordinary morality ................. p. 6

Cost-benefit analysis is a valuable economic tool on which the federal government is increasingly relying. But there are inherent limits to what it can be expected to accomplish ................. p. 9

How fair is workfare? Philosophers and policymakers take a look at the arguments for and against work requirements as a condition of welfare benefits ........................................ p. 11

Stanley Hoffmann's new book is reviewed . p. 13

Women are employed more extensively in the American armed forces than in the military forces of any other nation in the world. This increased reliance on women for our national defense is currently facing intense reexamination. The Army has recently ordered a "pause" in the escalated recruitment of female soldiers. And last year Congress, responding to President Carter's call for renewed Selective Service registration, voted, in opposition to the president's wishes, against female registration. The constitutionality of the male-only draft has been challenged in the courts, but the Supreme Court has upheld the restriction. Meanwhile, public opinion continues to oppose full integration of women into the military. Through all the controversy surrounding this issue, the moral question remains: Should men go off to war while women weep?

This question resolves itself into several further sets of questions. First, do women have a right to serve in their nation's armed forces, and if so, what is the source of this right? Second, what limits should be placed on this right? Are there sound empirical grounds for arguing that women's right to serve should not include a right to full participation in offensive combat? Finally, if men are drafted to serve, should women be drafted as well? Or should the female presence in the military remain voluntary? The answers we give to these questions depend on our views on the significance of sex-related differences, the purposes of the military, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.