

2019 Gen Robert E. Hogaboom Leadership Writing Contest: 1st Place

# In the Arena

Lessons learned about leadership, politics, and the media

by Maj Lauren Serrano

In 2014, I wrote the article, “Why Women Should Not be in the USMC Infantry.” It won first place in the *Marine Corps Gazette* MajGen Harold W. Chase Prize Essay contest. Writing that article was the catalyst to learning many other lessons about leadership, politics, American value manifestations in the military, military culture, social media, public affairs, and the media—many complicated and painful lessons I never learned via the 11 Principles of Leadership or 14 Leadership Traits. Most importantly, I learned what President Theodore Roosevelt meant by being the “man in the arena.”

## What Happened Next

When the *Gazette* contacted me to tell me I won the Chase contest, my immediate reaction was to redact the article. There is propensity to “fly under the radar” and avoid highlighting oneself. I was scared to expose myself, even if I did believe I was speaking truth to power. My husband looked at me and said,

Anyone that has ever stood for something has inevitably made waves and enemies, and that’s okay. You don’t always need to please everyone.

I married wisely.

Before the article was actually published, the prize was awarded by a general officer in a small conference room with just my husband and a couple other Marines. I was already feeling anxiety and opted out of a larger award ceremony. The intimate setting was ideal. I shared with the general that I was concerned about publicly entering a debate about such a controversial topic. He

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***“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”***

**—President Theodore Roosevelt, 1910**

told me he was proud of me for having courage and to not let anything that happened next prevent me from ever writing again. I think he knew what was in store for me.

One of my best female friends in the Corps is a huge advocate for integrating women into the infantry. Interestingly,

her husband was an instructor at the Infantry Officer Course and has the opposite opinion. I had brunch with them and broke the news that my article was forthcoming. It was an uncomfortable conversation but needed to happen in person. We are still best friends today. *Lesson: It is okay to have different opinions*



**A strong group of Marines at the 2018 Joint Women's Leadership Symposium in San Diego, CA. (Photo by Capt Christina Lopez.)**

than your friends, but do not let those differing opinions break up friendships (think about how Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Antonin Scalia were great friends despite being on opposite ends of the political spectrum). Engaging in mature debates and respecting the personal opinions of others is essential to good leadership and sound judgment.

The day the article was published, I received dozens of emails, LinkedIn messages, texts, and other messages from service members, active and retired, from all across the country, from lance corporals to general officers. That evening, while having dinner with a fellow captain, he exclaimed, "Dude, you're trending on Facebook and Twitter!" Until then, I did not even know what trending was. I googled my name and was in shock at how many hits came up. Overwhelmed by the attention and scared that I had done something detrimental and irreversible to my career, I cried myself to sleep that night. *Lesson: Choose courage but know that it comes with failure, heartbreak, vulnerability, and lots of emotions.*

In the week following the *Gazette* publication, the article was shared and republished in a variety of other venues, including German and Israeli newspapers. I read some of the comments but only stomached through about a dozen exceptionally hateful ones before I cringed and shut my laptop. I still have

not gone back and read the comments, even on the *Gazette* website. *Lesson: In using anonymity people can be flat out cruel and belligerent. It is okay to be a little deaf to this group; for if you do not, it can paralyze you. Fear of failing and fear of being criticized keeps people outside any arena.*

As opposed to callous critics hiding behind anonymous online personas, some chose to debate my opinion in a professional setting. A peer of mine published a counter article in the *Gazette*, something I tremendously respected and hope continued to move the ball forward on this sensitive topic. Someone at the Harvard Kennedy School contacted me to say my article was mandatory reading in one of their classes and wanted my opinion on several other gender-related topics. A military officer at the Army War College contacted me about his research on women in the military. A senior Marine officer connected me with his daughter who was working on an undergraduate capstone research project about women in combat. I had a passionate but professional debate at the Officer Women's Leadership Symposium with a fellow female captain assigned to The Basic School who adamantly defended the opposite opinion. *Task and Purpose* published an article accusing me of soricide and thinking like a man, a painful but permissible accusation. Other articles appeared

in publications like *The Free Beacon*, which defended me. I was invited to an interesting academic discussion at the Institute of World Politics. I regularly attend the Joint Women's Leadership Symposium where gender integration is always a hot topic. *Lesson: Ensure the arena you engage in is professional. Those who want to partake in productive, mature debate do so in professional forums. Attack the argument, not the person.*

In the weeks and months following publication, ongoing private dialogue naturally developed with various Marines, service members, and civilian leaders who reached out to me. I had great discussions with one professor at the Marine Corps University and another at the Naval Postgraduate School. A senior female officer working at the Pentagon tucked me under her wing and invited me to all-female lunches and happy hours. I had an extraordinary lunch in Quantico with a legendary female Marine leader who has made a lasting impression in my life. With these leaders, I had passionate discussions about values, the Corps, the meaning of gender equality, and life. Over the years, several of these people have remained mentors in my life. They were not assigned to me, I did not work directly for them, and mentorship was not forced. *Lesson: Sometimes the best mentorship comes from people outside your chain of command and stems from common beliefs, values, and interests. True and lasting mentor-mentee relationships should develop naturally.*

I was surprised by how some of the counterarguments chose to respond and pick apart my opinion. It became evident that many people did not understand the difference between integrating women into infantry units (making them 0311s) and allowing women to serve in combat. Never once did I say women should not serve in combat, be in the military at all, or discredit the many women who have deployed to combat zones and partook in kinetic fire. I have spent twelve months in a combat zone, am proud of that service, and think my time in Iraq aided mission accomplishment. Most people without military experience do not understand the difference between integrating the



infantry and dissolving the combat exemption for women; regardless, their opinions still count and can be loud. *Lesson: People hear what they want to hear. Social issues and policies can be complicated and sensitive. Be prepared for critics to twist your words, put words into your mouth, and make large assumptions—after which it is hard to backtrack. To the most extent possible, ensure your argument is wired tight and nuances explained.*

The Marines United scandal happened well after my article was published. Although the scandal was not directly about integrating women into the infantry, it was related. I closely monitored the situation and reflected on how my previous thoughts about integrating women into the infantry could have unintentionally had adverse effects on the wider issue of misogyny and gender harassment in the military.

In March 2017, I went to the Senate Hearing on Capitol Hill where many Senators grilled the most senior Marine leaders about Marines United, sexism, and the hyper-male culture in our Corps. I sat a few rows back from Gen Neller, SgtMaj Green, then-MGen Reynolds, and several other senior leaders and watched intently as they professionally and compassionately responded to the situation. The tension in the room was palpable. I sat quietly and listened to LtCol Kate Germano (Ret) talking to journalists a row behind me about her experiences at Parris Island. I observed the media go wild when a senator such as Kirsten Gillibrand had particularly harsh comments for the Commandant. I was 39 weeks pregnant, wore civilian attire, blended in with the audience, and barely said a word to anyone—in that moment I was very thankful to be anonymous. I spent the days and weeks that followed evaluating the gender integration issue from a strategic standpoint I had previously been blind to. *Lesson: As situations develop and change, so can opinions. As a junior officer understanding strategic context can be challenging, but try. Leaders never stop growing, thinking, and evolving. Deliberately think about issues holistically and from a myriad of perspectives. Senior leaders exist to solve wicked problems.*



**A photo I took while watching the Marines' United Senate Hearings. (Photo by author.)**

My original article also caught the attention of the news media. I was invited to interview on Fox News with Bret Baier, CNN, participate in a C-SPAN debate, and appear for several other media outlets or events. Before responding to anything, I ran the request through the Public Affairs section at the Pentagon, who for the most part advised me not to participate. I complied.

Then, about two years after publication, I received another request to participate in a military town hall with the President. The public affairs section said I could participate as it was a military engagement requested by the Executive Office. Although there was some debate about changing my question topic, ultimately it was decided that I could go ahead with asking about female integration as it was a topic the Executive Office was specifically looking to address. I worked with trusted mentors to craft what we believed was the best question to ask the President about female integration. One very senior leader took about 45 minutes out of his extremely busy schedule to coach me through what to expect. I clearly remember him telling me, “Stand tall and look the President in his eyes. I am proud of you.” His support gave me courage.

The day of the town hall CNN sent a private black car to pick my husband,

one-year-old, and me up from our house in Washington, D.C., and drive us to an Army base a few hours away. In order to protect the President, his whereabouts are kept secret and logistics involving his travel are complicated. This led to a vehicle and driver switch at the gate of the Army base, and my husband and I found ourselves piled into the back of a car with a Medal of Honor recipient and a semi-famous service member who had been featured in a wide-spread military documentary. I awkwardly asked something blunt like, “So what’s it like to be a living MOH recipient?” To which he eloquently responded, telling me about receiving the medal and how it has changed his life. I feel lucky to have had that private, special conversation with him; he humbles me.

Once in the town hall space, I was shuffled to a seat by an eager CNN employee. The CNN crew recorded the opening segment prior to the arrival of President Obama. I thought to myself how different CNN anchor Jake Tapper looked in person as opposed to television and was impressed by his ability to turn his television persona on/off like a light switch. When President Obama arrived not a single moment was wasted, cameras rolled, and we jumped right into the town hall with questions from the audience. Shortly into the event, a CNN employee tapped me on the



Behind the scenes of the CNN Presidential Town Hall. (Photo by Maj David Serrano.)

shoulder with a microphone and said, “You’re next!” Although I had my question memorized, I could not help but look down at my note card in fear of completely clammup on national television. At one point during President Obama’s response, he looked me over and remarked that I must be in better shape than he. I still had the microphone in my hand and wanted to blurt out, “I am four months pregnant, Sir!” However, I figured that would be inappropriate (albeit an unforgettable way to announce the pregnancy to family).

Throughout the town hall, I was thoroughly impressed with the President’s ability to think on his feet and eloquently articulate responses despite having no note cards or taking a break. At the conclusion of the town hall, he waded through the audience shaking hands with participants. When it was my turn, I challenged him to do pull ups with me out back of the gym, but he politely declined and said he had to get going.

After the town hall aired on national television, I received dozens of emails and texts from mentors and friends—and ignored the critics. At work the next day, my shop at the FBI played the town hall multiple times on the TV, each time it felt like an out of body experience. Later that week at the Pentagon, I was stopped in the hallway a few times by people who recognized me—a strange

feeling for a captain who is generally a nobody at the Pentagon. It was uncomfortable.

A year after the town hall, I did an interview on All Marine Radio. I put my foot in my mouth a few times and made several comments I wish I had not. Then, I was featured in the *Washington Post* (Nov 2017) with several other female Marines who are four times

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as amazing as I could ever hope to be. I did not like one of the photos the *Post* chose and cringed at the paragraph they truncated our hour-long interview into. *Lesson: Being in the arena creates paths you never knew you would find yourself on. The journey can even be interesting and exciting at times, but do not let the excitement overtake sound judgment, sup-*

*press humility, or consume you. Always remember where your loyalties lie. Lesson: Interact with the media using caution and discretion, and always consult Communications Strategy Officers (formerly PAOs). COMMSTRAT is there to help but they are also required to hold the party line and protect the Corps. Stay away from media outlets with political biases. When in doubt, seek mentorship and top cover. Lesson: When a senior leader—in this case the Commander in Chief—requests a forum specifically to discuss charged issues important to the services, rise to the occasion. Especially if they ask, do not just tell leaders what they want to hear, tell them what they need to hear.*

Over the years I have been brought into several sensitive conversations and efforts that were occurred behind closed doors and at high levels of the U.S. Government. I attended several invite-only fancy dinners and luncheons in which I found myself talking to senior military leaders, lobbyists, politicians, fellow out-spoken service members, and key government influencers. One evening when checking in for a Black Tie speaker event I had pre-registered for, the lady at the front desk unexpectedly shuffled me over to a VIP section where some influential people were waiting to talk with me. My drinks for the evening remained complimentary, and I spent the evening deep in conversation about the future of the military service. I always knew these kind of political events occurred, but never thought I would find myself a part of them. Although I always ran my participation through appropriate channels and mentors, I was still cautious about which events to attend and which not to. It was not lost on me that I was being used as a symbol to promote a political opinion; I was there because I was a female Marine officer who did not think women should serve in infantry units. Plenty of men have been vocal about their like-minded opinions, but their gender prevented them from being skylined. *Lesson: Politics is a dirty business. Decisions and influence are derived behind opaque walls. Lobbyists and special interest groups have their own agenda. They could potentially view you as a pawn to further their cause, regardless of follow-on effects to your career*



or personal life. It is important to be aware of these forums and be invited into this arena but do so with eyes wide open.

Even though it has been six years since the *Gazette* published the article, it follows me. It comes up in nearly every hail and farewell, and Marines randomly ask me about it. A few months ago, a fellow female Marine reposted the article in our female Marine-only Facebook group “Actionable Change” with a nasty comment about how not all of us support one another. I responded with a very long post detailing past sexual assault/harassment experiences and the mindset I was in at the time of writing (I was a newly promoted captain coming off a 12 month deployment where sexual assault, harassment, and misconduct had been a constant distractor from the actual mission in Iraq—I was in a dark place), but my last paragraph to the group is worth sharing with a wider audience. I wrote:

Do I regret writing the article? No. I think it stimulated needed debate and taught me a lot about who I want to be, what I want to stand for, and what kind of [N]ation I want to fight for. In a roundabout way, I also like to think it was a catalyst in driving change and acceptance. Clearly some of the things I wrote about are toxic, and instead of

taking women out of the equation, we have since “fought back” and developed a way to progress. At the time I wrote this article I never thought that would be possible. Do I still have all of the same opinions? Yes and No. Many of my opinions have changed, some remain. I still believe that mission and readiness should drive change vice a social agenda, however, I do recognize the greatness in gender integration. I think allowing the “brotherhood” (i.e., sometimes misogyny) to be accepted is BS. I think expecting men and women to be interchangeable is not only impossible but does a disservice to the amazing qualities that only women bring to the table. I do think sexual assault and harassment will continue to be an issue... among consensual sexual misconduct and fraternization that is apparently rampant in all integrated units—every unit I’ve served in is no exception. But do my opinions or any of the above even matter? NO!! The decision to integrate has been made, and we are pressing forward, so why are we still bringing this crap up? I’ve gotten over it and am on board with progress. I am still an AD [active duty] Marine Officer and when my boss gives me a lawful order—regardless of personal skepticism—I march. I want to march

in the same direction as my sisters in arms.

*Lesson: What you publish in writing and post online can become part of your reputation forever—and haunt you if it is bad. It can shape some people’s opinions of you before they even meet you or give you a chance. Who somebody was as a 25-year-old lieutenant is not necessarily who they are as a 35-year-old major or who they will be as a 45-year-old colonel. Leaders must evolve with the times, allow themselves to constantly grow, and even change their minds. Being wrong in hindsight is better than having been irrelevant.*

### Closing Thoughts

I hope sharing some of my experiences prevents people from making some of the same mistakes or at least sheds light on what could happen if you are an opinionated loudmouth like me. I never imagined that an opinion piece in the *Gazette* would lead to meeting the President, make me loved or hated in various circles, or have such a profound impact on my life—both good and bad.

Bottom line, be smartly in the arena—whatever that arena is for you. (It does not have to be writing *Gazette* articles!) Speak truth to power, believe in what you say, and rely on the good people that surround you. “Flying under the radar” is safe, but it will never yield meaningful results or promote change. Change agents take risks. Do not be afraid to have an opinion and articulate it but also know when to swallow personal opinions, end the debate, and follow orders. It is also okay to be wrong or change your opinion. When in doubt, fall back on your morals, values, and mentors. But always remember it is not about you, it is about what is best for the team.

Throughout this entire experience, one thought sticks with me that a mentor comforted me with at one difficult point. He told me that he had gotten in trouble or made waves at almost every rank along his exceptionally successful military career. He told me not to be a coward and be proud. He told me to be in the arena; it is where the leaders are.



A photo of the cover of Stars & Stripes featuring my daughter and me (a repost from the Washington Post print). (Photo by author.)

