PERSONNEL ADMINISTRATOR OF MASSACHUSETTS V. FEENEY, 442 U.S. 256 (1979), a Supreme Court case that considered whether a Massachusetts law giving veterans a lifetime preference in filling open civil service positions discriminated against women in violation of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Helen B. Feeney was a civil servant who received higher grades on civil service examinations than male veterans. Because of the preference law, however, males repeatedly were promoted over her. Twice the federal district court declared the law unconstitutional. The state of Massachusetts, supported by the solicitor general of the United States, appealed to the Supreme Court. The Court in a seven-to-two decision sustained the law.

A basic question was whether the effect of the preference classification was “purposeful discrimination.” It was generally agreed that the statute disproportionately affected women. Until 1967 there had been a 2 percent quota on women in the military. Male nonveterans, however, suffered from this preferred treatment as much as female nonveterans. Because it distinguished between veterans and nonveterans, not between women and men, the Court detected no discriminatory purpose in the statute. The opinion raised the standard for proving gender discrimination by obliging plaintiffs to prove that the legislature that drafted the statute in question specifically intended the law to achieve the foreseeable discriminatory outcome.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

“PETER PRINCIPLE” is an idea first formulated by Canadian author Laurence J. Peter (1919–1990) in his best-selling book The Peter Principle: Why Things Always Go Wrong (1969). The central thesis of Peter’s satirical commentary on business bureaucracies is that “in a hierarchy, every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence.” According to Peter, work is accomplished only by those employees who have not yet reached their level of incompetence. In this way, organizations and businesses can still function. The result is that stagnant companies are more likely to have incompetent employees at many levels of their organization, whereas growing companies who add new positions and employees can forestall the Peter Principle as long as growth continues.

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PETERSBURG, SIEGE OF (1864–1865). Repulsed by the Confederate forces of Gen. Robert E. Lee at Cold Harbor (3 June 1864), Gen. Ulysses S. Grant decided to approach Richmond, Va., from the south, through Petersburg. Crossing the James River at Wyanoke Neck on 14 June, his leading corps attacked Petersburg on 15 June. After three days of fighting, the federal troops captured the eastern defenses. Lee’s army then arrived, occupied a shorter line nearer the city, and turned away the last assaults.

While waging siege operations on the eastern front, Grant pushed his left flank southwestward to envelop Petersburg and cut the railways leading south. Defeated at the Battle of the Crater, 30 July, Union forces finally succeeded in cutting the Weldon Railroad in late August. In September Grant extended his right flank across the James and captured Fort Harrison, eight miles south of Richmond, compelling Lee to move much of his army north of the James. The Confederates retreated until Lee decisively halted Grant’s advance on 27 October, and field operations virtually ceased during the winter.

Foreseeing that when spring came his attenuated line would be broken by superior numbers, Lee, on 25 March 1865, assaulted Fort Stedman. The attack failed and