



Volume 52
Issue 1 *Symposium: Eighth Annual LatCrit
Conference City & The Citizen: Operations of
Power, Strategies of Resistance*

Article 9

2005

Disguising Empire: Racialized Masculinity and the Civilizing of Iraq

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Recommended Citation

Nancy Ehrenreich, *Disguising Empire: Racialized Masculinity and the Civilizing of Iraq*, 52 Clev. St. L. Rev. 131 (2005)
available at <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clevstlrev/vol52/iss1/9>

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DISGUISED EMPIRE: RACIALIZED MASCULINITY AND THE “CIVILIZING” OF IRAQ

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I’m interested in exploring the gender-based messages conveyed by current popular discourse on the recent American invasion of Iraq. Not only public discussion in general, but also anti-war discourse in particular, rarely mentions gender in analyzing (and critiquing) Gulf War II or the so-called War on Terrorism.² Yet, in ignoring the subtle gender messages deployed in support of U.S. actions, critics impoverish their critiques and leave unchallenged important contributors to, and legitimators of, American acts of aggression.³

I will argue here that popular discourse on war and terrorism enacts and reinforces an image of masculinity as nationalistic, racially aggressive, homophobic, and sexist. Yet that discourse also disguises these negative attributes by presenting masculinity as principled, civilizing and beneficent. Media coverage of Gulf War II, in particular, has expressed and enforced this construction of masculinity, disguising American imperialism as noble expressions of civilizing, manly power.

A brief caveat before beginning: The ideas presented here are just that, ideas. It is not my goal, in this short essay, to prove every assertion, to provide numerous examples, or to establish contentions as “fact” through the marshalling of extensive evidence. I simply offer some personal impressions in the hope that they will be sufficiently thought-provoking to motivate others to explore the role that gender plays in popular discourse on war and terror.

I. THE NATION STATE AND REFLECTED MASCULINITY

War is, of course, a paradigmatically male activity. And attitudes towards American military engagements reflect and reinforce assumptions about masculinity

¹Professor of Law, University of Denver College of Law. This essay is based on a talk originally delivered at the LatCrit VIII conference held at the Cleveland-Marshall Law School in May, 2003. I am grateful to Elaine Enarson and Sherryl Weston for providing useful feedback on the piece, and to Kate Lovelace and Diane Burkhardt for research assistance.

²*But see, e.g.,* Katha Politt, *Victory Gardens?!*, THE NATION, Nov. 19, 2001, at 10.

³I don’t mean to suggest that academic treatments of war and masculinity, as opposed to popular discourse, have ignored gender. *See, e.g.,* SUSAN JEFFORDS, THE REMASCULINIZATION OF AMERICA (1989); JAMES MCBRIDE, WAR, BATTERING, AND OTHER SPORTS: THE GULF BETWEEN AMERICAN MEN AND WOMEN (1995); ROBIN MORGAN, THE DEMON LOVER: THE ROOTS OF TERRORISM (2001).

– about what makes men “real” men. Moreover, I would suggest that both men and women in this country sometimes identify with a masculinized nation state. That is, members of both sexes can obtain a validating sense of masculinity (of strength, moral merit, and the like) from the reflected masculinity of their country. Concomitantly, many individuals (of both sexes) may feel emasculated (that is, may feel a humiliating loss of power) when their sense of the strength and “maleness” of their country is threatened – such as by the events of September 11, 2001.⁴ Thus, pro-war rhetoric that presents national policy as an expression of American masculinity invites citizens to bask in the reflected glare of state virility, improving their own sense of self-worth through identification with the aggressive actions of their government. As a result, many people in the United States are drawn to rhetoric that valorizes the masculinity of the nation, especially when that rhetoric is voiced in response to an emasculating national calamity such as 9-11.⁵

Because identification with the nation state may encourage certain individuals to support American aggression abroad as a means of shoring up their own sense of self-worth, it is especially important for critics to draw attention to this gender component of pro-war discourse and to encourage resistance to its effects. Not only can this phenomenon of vicarious masculinity produce flawed assessments of foreign policies, but it also reinforces narrow definitions of masculinity that are harmful to men and women alike.⁶ Yet anti-war commentary has done little to draw attention to this phenomenon, ignoring rather than highlighting the extent to which pro-war rhetoric appeals to individuals’ desire for access to the reflected, valorizing masculinity of the state.

I will argue here that the rhetoric used by the Bush administration (and the media) to sell U.S. military aggression to the American public has played upon the gender insecurities and racial biases of the population. To be more specific, it has reinforced a racialized national sense of masculinity by playing on the association of maleness with violent domination of people of color – domination seen as laudable because it is undertaken “for their own good.” In so doing, it has also reinforced the message (previously noted by Toni Morrison⁷) that the way for people of color in

⁴See, NANCY EHRENREICH, *Masculinity and American Militarism*, TIKKUN, Nov/Dec, 2002, at 45.

⁵I mean, of course, a calamity that is *perceived* as emasculating. For further development of the argument in the text, see *id.*

⁶It is well established that in Western thought “successful” masculinity has always been defined in contrast to a failed masculinity associated with various out-groups. Mosse, in his history of masculinity, notes that, at various points in time, Europeans (first the French and English, later the Irish and Italians), children, Jews, African Americans, Latinos, Asians and gays have all been disparaged as lacking masculine attributes. GEORGE L. MOSSE, *THE IMAGE OF MAN: THE CREATION OF MODERN MASCULINITY* (1996). And of course, the group that is always, by definition, the opposite of masculine is women. But masculinity is such an unattainable ideal that it even harms those who, by its terms, are identified as “successful” males. See, e.g., MICHAEL KIMMEL, *Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, & Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity*, *THEORIZING MASCULINITIES* 136-38 (Harry Brod & Michael Kaufman eds., 1994).

⁷Toni Morrison, *PLAYING IN THE DARK: WHITENESS AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION* 52 (1992). See also, Ehrenreich, *supra* note 4; Sherene Razack, *Outwhiting the White Guys:” Men of Color and Peacekeeping Violence*, 71 UMKC L. REV. 331, 334 (2002).

this country to become true “Americans” is for them to show they are willing to subordinate other people of color. They must show, in other words, that they are willing to play the masculinized role of the enlightened, civilizing “American.”

Focusing on governmental and media “war talk,” I’ll discuss three aspects of the hegemonic masculinity that this discourse expresses and helps to construct: First, “real men” are men who use violence against people of color. Second, “real men” are men who civilize barbarians. And, third, “real men” are men who rescue women.

II. “REAL MEN” USE VIOLENCE AGAINST PEOPLE OF COLOR

Proponents of the war against Iraq (as well as the previous Gulf War I) exulted in demonizing “the enemy” and vividly depicting his/its⁸ demise. Flyers, cartoons, and the like depicted Saddam Hussein as a primitive, pre-civilized form of human and showed him being sodomized, shot, or otherwise harmed and degraded.⁹ Talk radio hosts and standup comedians made endless jokes at the expense of Saddam in particular and the Iraqi forces in general. Jay Leno, performing before an all-military audience, suggested that Bush, in a post-war press conference, must have had a hard time figuring out how to nicely say “we kicked butt.” Soon, Leno joked, the government was going to put out a “highlights” video, showing the best bombing attacks of the war.¹⁰ An American reporter covering Gulf War II pretended to “interview” the carbonized corpse of an Iraqi car driver, immolated in his car, while scandalized Iraqis watched from nearby street corners. A disk jockey in Denver gloated about how the MOAB bomb was going to make gutless Iraqi soldiers flee in fear.

The image conveyed by each of these examples – in addition to the dehumanization of Iraqis they evoke – is of the humiliation and emasculation of Saddam and his troops by the U.S. military. Moreover, each comment (even, perhaps, the “interview”) evinces an identification by the speaker with U.S. military might—a sense that the speaker’s own masculinity will be (or has been) enhanced by our military exploits. The comments also glorify and trivialize the destruction that war wreaks, making the deaths of Iraqi soldiers and civilians alike into subjects of humor. The property destruction and lives lost due to the American bombardment, this discourse clearly implies, constitute entertainment for the American people. Even though none of the comments contains explicitly racial epithets, the speakers surely must have known who the “enemy” was, making the racial subtext clear.

This trivializing of enemy deaths, I suggest, was made easier by the fact that those being killed were Arabs and Muslims,¹¹ for the dominant masculinity in this

⁸I say “his” and “its” because the enemy was conceptualized both as an abstract, institutional entity (the nation of “Iraq”) and as the more concrete, personalized image of the Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein. Bush took pains to distinguish both from the “Iraqi people.”

⁹See, e.g., MCBRIDE, *supra* note 3, at 169-74 (describing cartoon called “Descent of Man,” which depicted Clark Gable as the apex of male evolution and Saddam Hussein as the nadir, behind the gorilla, the chimpanzee, and the snake).

¹⁰I was unable to obtain a text of this program to confirm the exact language that Leno used. The language presented here is paraphrased based on my memory of the program.

¹¹For further discussion of negative images of Muslims, see *infra*, text accompanying notes 24-27.

society is constructed not only as violent,¹² but as violent against particular types of people. As noted above, in the United States, to be manly is to be violent against racialized “others.”¹³ From movie villains to military opponents, most of the “bad guys” against whom American “heroes” demonstrate their masculine prowess are people (usually men) of color. The idea of masculinity as violent and racially superior, and the equation of victimization with racial minority status (as well as with demeaning femininity and homosexuality¹⁴) evoke dehumanizing humor of the type described above. For it is through the violent domination of these various others that the American male—and the American nation state—establish their virile, masculine status.

III. “REAL MEN” CIVILIZE BARBARIANS

Yet the fact that manliness is associated with violent domination of people of color does not fully explain why the American media and the American public have been willing to tolerate, and participate in, such offensive and dehumanizing depictions of war victories. George Bush’s assurances that in Gulf War II we were fighting the Iraqi dictator and Iraqi government, not the Iraqi people, are evidence of the fact that the current climate would not tolerate blatant efforts to exterminate another people, even a people as stigmatized as the Iraqis are in the U.S. national psyche. The nation’s efforts at psychic body-building through war and continuing occupation would certainly lack legitimacy if they were not seen as ultimately beneficial to the country being attacked and the world in general, rather than as merely furthering narrow U.S. interests.

Since Theodore Roosevelt at least, the dominant American conception of masculinity has involved “adventurous but civilized white men [who] tame or defeat savage men of color.”¹⁵ The emphasis here should be placed on the word, “civilized.” Just as British imperialists were supposed to be calm conquerors, tempering their power and passion with reason, so American males are constructed as enacting a civilized—and civilizing—masculinity.¹⁶ George W. Bush invokes this imagery in the contrast he frequently draws between the nonwhite “rogue states” he wants to attack and the “civilized world” (led, presumably, by an *uber*-civilized United States). In thereby implying that the Arab and Asian nations (his “axis of evil”) are “uncivilized,”¹⁷ Bush suggests that U.S. military force is needed to protect

¹²See, e.g., Ehrenreich, *supra* note 4; Kimmel, *supra* note 6, at 130-32. As Kimmel convincingly elaborates, violence is a way of rebutting the “sissy” image that men so deathly fear. That image, of course, stigmatizes men as both effeminate and homosexual.

¹³See, e.g., Ehrenreich, *supra* note 4; Razack *supra* note 7.

¹⁴See Ehrenreich, *supra* note 4.

¹⁵JoAnne Nagel, *Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations*, *March ETHNIC AND RACIAL STUDIES* 251 (1998) (quoted in Sherene Razack, *From the “Clean Snows of Petawawa”: The Violence of Canadian Peacekeepers*, 15 *CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY* 127, 132 (2000) (describing Roosevelt’s rhetoric)).

¹⁶*Compare*, MOSSE, *supra* note 6, at 15 (describing British masculinity).

¹⁷A recent example of Bush rhetoric: “No nation can be neutral in the struggle between civilization and chaos.” See Maureen Dowd, *The Jihad All-Stars*, *N.Y. TIMES*, Aug. 27, 2003, at A23 (quoting Bush).

the world from their savage destructiveness. Maleness in this society necessarily entails “taming” the uncivilized–dominating people of color by force. But that domination is also effected for their own good; it benefits those to whom it is directed.

The image of a beneficent U.S. intervention dominates American media coverage of Iraq. A recent cover of *The Economist*, for example, presented a touching picture of an Iraqi man and a young boy holding hands, with the headline: “Rebuilding Iraq: How to Win the Peace.”¹⁸ The Bush administration has also repeatedly emphasized the importance of rebuilding the Iraqi nation, and has made it clear that it sees repairing the destruction wrought by the war as an act of generosity.¹⁹ Yet it is highly ironic to see the American role in post-war Iraq (if we’ve even attained a post-war state yet²⁰) as magnanimous. After all, American defense contractors made huge amounts of money on the war itself, and American companies stand to profit even more with lucrative contracts to rebuild what they helped to destroy.²¹

But “rebuilding” has a broader sense as well: transforming the culture of the nation, “teaching” Iraqis to be a democratic, open society. Thus, another piece in *The Economist* was entitled “After the War is Over,” with the sub-headline, “Iraq will need coaxing towards democracy.”²² The U.S. mission is a “civilizing” mission,

¹⁸ Cover, THE ECONOMIST, April 16, 2003.

¹⁹Some Bush statements to this effect include: “Likewise, the work we do today is essential to the peace of the world and for the security of our country. America is a nation that understands its responsibilities and keeps its word. And we will honor our word to the people of Iraq and those in the Middle East who yearn for freedom.” President George W. Bush, Address at the 85th Annual American Legion National Convention (Aug. 26, 2003) (transcript available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov>); “The transition from dictatorship to democracy will take time, but it is worth every effort. Our coalition will stay until our work is done. Then we will leave, and we will leave behind a free Iraq.” President George W. Bush, Remarks from the USS Abraham Lincoln (May 1, 2003) (transcript available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov>).

²⁰More U.S. soldiers have been killed during the occupation than during the actual war. Linda Feldmann, *How ‘Pushback’ Plays for Bush on Iraq*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR, Aug. 29, 2003, at 2. See also Richard A. Oppel Jr., *Bombs Kill 2 U.S. Soldiers in Convoys; Oxfam Joins Fight of Relief Groups*, CHI. TRIB., Aug. 28, 2003, at 6.

²¹The oil giant Haliburton, Dick Cheney’s former company, is one of a number of U.S. firms given contracts to participate in the rebuilding – contracts that were awarded in a special, closed-bidding process. *Democracy Now!* (Pacifica Network broadcast, Mar. 12, 2003). Haliburton’s contracts are likely worth in the billions. The *Herald Sun* reports that the rebuilding contract the company signed in January is worth \$1.5 billion. *Worley in Iraq Oil Deal*, SUN. HERALD SUN, Jan. 18, 2004, at http://web2.westlaw.com/welcome/NewsAndBusiness/default.wl?TF=1&TC=7&MT=NewsAndBusiness&RS=WLW4.03&VR=2.0&S V=Split&FN=_top. Aljazeera reports that an Army spokesperson put the value of the rebuilding contract given to Haliburton subsidiary Kellogg, Brown and Root (apparently the same contract referred to in the *Herald Sun* article) at \$948 million. Haliburton also has a 10-year “field service” contract, dating from 2001, worth \$1 billion. See *Haliburton Iraq Contracts Worth \$2 bn*, Sept. 3, 2003, at <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/65753C17-BC3A-49A5-AD04-6418547B8CFF.htm>. The money paid to American companies accounts for at least a quarter of the daily costs of the U.S. occupation of Iraq. *Democracy Now!* (Pacifica Network broadcast, Aug. 28, 2003).

²²*After the War is Over*, ECONOMIST, Mar. 8, 2003, at 26.

designed not only to save Iraqis from their barbaric ruler but also to completely transform the nature of their sociopolitical system. (Never mind, of course, that so far the only “democracy” we have established has been a puppet government appointed by United States officials and presiding over the transfer of the Iraqi oil business to U.S. corporations.²³)

As Edward Said pointed out, the West almost always fights wars to “civilize” non-Western peoples.²⁴ The war against Iraq would not have even been possible, he argued, without an entrenched U.S. view of Muslims/Arabs as uncivilized terrorists.²⁵ A review of the books on “Muslims” listed at the website of Internet bookseller Amazon.com provides striking evidence of that stereotype. Out of the top ten best-selling books listed under “Muslims” at that site, four clearly evoke harmful stereotypes: *Militant Islam Reaches America*; *The New World War: A Behind-the-Scenes Look at Why and How Militant Muslims Plan to Destroy Western Civilization*; *Price of Honor: Muslim Women Lift the Veil of Silence on the Islamic World*; and *American Jihad: The Terrorists Living Among Us*. As Said also pointed out, the notion of remaking Iraq in our image – establishing, as Thomas Friedman recently put it, a “decent Iraq as a model for others”²⁶ – evinces immense hubris, for it assumes that we can wipe the slate clean, eviscerate thousands of years of history and culture, with a single year or two of occupation.²⁷

Racialization of Iraqis, and Muslims in general, as backward, uncivilized, sexist, and fanatically religious is what makes possible the construction of U.S. imperialism as civilizing, principled and beneficent. And the hegemonic construction of American masculinity as the forceful yet principled domination of nonwhite barbarians by white “heroes” reinforces that racialization, necessarily implying that the targets of U.S. military actions are unprincipled, ignorant, and dangerous Others. By constructing the ideal American male as a man whose violence is exercised in a selfless, controlled, and beneficial way against backward non-whites, dominant American norms of masculinity help to make “civilizing” missions like Gulf War II both believable and appealing to many Americans.

IV. “REAL” MEN RESCUE WOMEN

Of course, the Amazon.com list also displays another racialized stereotype – of societies that are fanatically oppressive of women. And that stereotype is consistent with another trope of hegemonic American masculinity: woman-rescuing. Central to the gender norms characterizing such masculinity – and especially to hypermasculine, “hero” roles like soldier – is the selfless act of protecting a woman from danger. Of course, the rhetoric of saving women from Muslim

²³Of course, what we say we’re doing is selling Iraqi oil to finance the rebuilding of the country. But because we’re hiring American companies to do that rebuilding, and especially given the serious inadequacies in the current “rebuilding” effort – what it surely must look like to Iraqis is theft, padding the pockets of American interests with money from Iraqi oil.

²⁴Interview with Edward Said, Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University, on *Democracy Now!* (Pacifica Network broadcast, Apr. 24, 2003).

²⁵*Id.*

²⁶Thomas L. Friedman, *Because We Could*, N.Y. TIMES, June 4, 2003, at A31.

²⁷*Democracy Now!*, *supra* note 24.

fundamentalism, used by the U.S. government in Afghanistan, was not readily available for use against the secular state of Iraq, which had much more liberal policies towards women than, for example, our ally, Saudi Arabia. So the Bush administration invented its own scenario of woman-rescue: the fraudulent saga of Private Jessica Lynch. What was the most celebrated male “heroic” act of Gulf War II? Lynch’s supposedly “daring rescue from behind enemy lines” that turned out to be a staged raid on a hospital where she was actually being treated for her injuries—injuries that she sustained in a Humvee wreck, not bravely fighting off Iraqi troops as the government had originally claimed.²⁸

But the interesting part about the Jessica Lynch story is its enduring grasp on the American imagination. Even though the fraud had been public knowledge for weeks, Lynch was still treated to a hero’s welcome in her hometown of Palestine, West Virginia, upon her release from the hospital.²⁹ NBC ran a feature television film on the “rescue” (which Lynch did not cooperate with the network on) and Lynch intends to present her story in a book.³⁰ The exact source of Lynch’s heroism at this point (if heroism is even the right word) is an interesting question to ponder. Since she did not in fact bravely fight off Iraqi attackers, the only thing she seems to have accomplished is to have been severely injured and survived. Not a trivial accomplishment, to be sure, but not the stuff that heroic tales are usually made of. Thus, the first female soldier (to my knowledge) to be glorified in the American press since the military was opened to women is the classic victim, an injured female “saved” by men.

The obsessive focus on the Lynch story thus both reveals and reinforces the mainstream construction of “real men” as superior to women. Men rescue women because they are stronger and braver. The construction of American masculinity worked by media coverage of the Lynch story thus enacts and reinforces gender inequality. Moreover, it effaces the real story of the Lynch episode: blatant lying by the American government and the media’s naïve (or gutless? corrupt?) acceptance of those lies. The enduring strength – and vicarious appeal – of the woman-rescuing image of masculinity thus makes the American public vulnerable to cynical manipulation by its government. In its efforts to shore up its own sense of virility by associating with the supposedly civilized violence of its military, the population risks losing the very democracy it sees itself as exporting.

²⁸Dana Priest, William Booth & Susan Schmidt, *A Broken Body, A Broken Story, Pieced Together; Investigation Reveals Lynch – Still In Hospital After 67 Days – Suffered Bone-Crushing Injuries In Crash During Ambush*, WASH. POST, June 17, 2003, at A01.

²⁹Peter Whoriskey, *Grateful W. Virginians Embrace Pfc. Lynch; Rescued Soldier Returns the Affection at Long-Delayed Homecoming*, WASH. POST, July 23, 2003, at A1.

³⁰Bill Carter, *Private Lynch Pulls Out of Movie Deal with NBC*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 8, 2003 at A11. To be fair, the network did make an Iraqi lawyer, not Lynch, the hero of the story, and indirectly suggested that the Bush administration had tried to reap political benefit from the incident. Moreover, Lynch herself has tended to tell the story of her experience in less heroic terms than the military and media have told it. (I am indebted to Pedro Malavet for this point.) Nevertheless, these facts do not belie the gender messages implicit in all parties’ willingness to make a bigger-than-life drama out of these events.

V. CONCLUSION

Fifty years of feminist scholarship have shown how patriarchal definitions of masculinity harm women. Much has been written recently about how gender norms that impose a demanding and dehumanizing notion of masculinity ultimately harm men as well. But now, it's time to look at how masculine norms harm the entire nation. The anti-war movement needs to make the connections between gender and war vividly clear. It needs to identify the invasion of Iraq as a racist and imperialist war justified by reference to a sexist, white supremacist, and homophobic sense of masculinity. And it needs to show how the appeal of the self-esteem boost that such reflected masculinity can deliver makes the American public vulnerable to a manipulating and misguided government.