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Women, Words and War: Explaining 9/11 and Justifying U.S. Military Action in Afghanistan and Iraq¹

By Nancy W. Jabbra²

Abstract

Texts and images in the print media, outdoor advertisements, and on the Internet form the primary source material for this article. The Bush administration and the American media, drawing upon well-worn traditions of representation, contrasted American women and Muslim/Middle Eastern women, American and Middle Eastern male sexuality, and the moral qualities (good versus evil) of American and Middle Eastern people. They used those contrasts to explain 9/11 and legitimize war in Afghanistan and Iraq. 9/11 was simply explained through a contrast between American innocence and Muslim savagery. For Afghanistan, the predominant trope was liberating Afghan women from the Taliban, or white men rescuing brown women from brown men, a story at least as old as the British Raj. The Iraq representations were more complex; both pro-war and anti-war proponents used the same images of suffering Iraqi women and girls, but to different ends: Saddam Hussein was a demon who must be destroyed, or the suffering was caused by sanctions and Western military action. Saddam himself was conflated with Iraq, and images of deviant sexuality were employed. Throughout, American women and girls were portrayed as the right kind of woman: usually white and innocent, or heroic soldiers. In any case, they were free, not oppressed.

Keywords: Orientalism, Women in the Middle East, Justifying War

Introduction

I am concerned in this article about the ways in which representations, primarily visual, of Middle Eastern and American women and men, generated by U.S. government spokespersons, celebrities, organizations, Internet sites, advertisements, newspapers, and newsmagazines served to interpret 9/11 and promote the agenda of war on Afghanistan and Iraq. The representations were not, of course, the only explanations of 9/11 or justifications for war, but they formed a substantial part of them.

These representations have a long if not honorable history. The images of the lewd and lascivious Turk and the effeminate or homosexual Arab go back at least to the French Renaissance (Poirier 1996: 157-159). These were images of men, but Middle Eastern women haven't fared any better in Western literature. As Judy Mabro stated in the introduction to her anthology of European travelers' accounts, the veil was always an item of fascination, as was the harem.³ The women were almost invariably depicted as exclusively sexual beings and, locked up in harems and deprived of male company, they

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association held in Halifax, Nova Scotia, May-June, 2003. Thanks to Paige Edley, Department of Communication Studies, for her helpful comments on this paper. She is not responsible for any errors that remain.

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³ Harem, a rather old-fashioned term, referred to the family section of a residence as opposed to the room used for receiving guests, or to the women's part of a palace.

had recourse to lesbian practices (Mabro 1991: 1-27). The same sorts of images could be found in the postcards made for French consumption in colonial Algeria (Alloula 1986).⁴ Muslim women living in the United States protest that their "identity is reduced to a burka" (Al-Marayati and Issa 2002). The harem girl is alive and well in American media; for example, "I Dream of Jeannie" lives on in television re-runs and on web sites.⁵

As "I Dream of Jeannie" suggests, stereotypic representations of Middle Eastern people are deeply embedded in American culture. For example, high school and Sunday school texts and curricula depict Middle Eastern people as violent, uncultured, backward, desert nomads whose religion teaches them that women are meant to be the slaves of men; indeed, the veiled woman is routinely depicted as a symbol of Islam (Al-Qazzaz 1975: 116-124; Abu-Laban 1975: 160-162; Suleiman 1977: 44-47). Popular American fiction is little different. Arab men are violent, sadistic and promiscuous sexually. The women are controlled by codes of honor, but also promiscuous like the men. And, of course they are oppressed (Sabbagh 1990).

These types of images have been well documented. Jack Shaheen for example, has described the "threatening, shifty-eyed, hook-nosed, dirty, sulking Arab" in entertainment television (1980: 39). In *The TV Arab* he developed "The Instant TV Arab Kit:" "...a belly dancer's outfit, headdresses (which look like tablecloths pinched from a restaurant), veils, sunglasses, flowing gowns and robes, oil wells, limousines and/or camels" (1984: 5). In *Reel Bad Arabs* (2001), he reviewed over 900 feature films, finding that nearly all of them portrayed Arab men as evil, Arab women as covered and oppressed. Perhaps the most well-known critique and deconstruction of these images emerged out of Edward Said's work, which related Western constructions of the Oriental to the unequal power relationship between East and West; as he pointed out, "the scientist, the scholar...was in, or thought about, the Orient because he *could be there*, or think about it, with very little resistance on the Orient's part" (1978: 7). Although the term Orientalism is not much used in America, the United States is nevertheless heir to France's and Britain's political and intellectual creation. Recently, the mass media have contributed substantially toward standardizing and stereotyping representations of the Orient, particularly the Arab and Islamic Middle East—the focus of Said's book. At the same time, the Arab-Israel conflict and the American need for oil have contributed remarkably to the politicization of these by-now simplified representations. Thus, more than ever, the Oriental, the Other, is viewed in a negative way. It is thus not surprising that Iran and Iraq as well as North Korea, formed President George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil."

The unequal power relationship between the West and the Middle East is also responsible for common depictions of Middle Eastern men as oriented toward homosexuality and deviant sexual behavior. "To perceive the East as a sexual domain, and to perceive the East as a domain to be colonised, were complementary aspirations"

⁴ According to Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1992: 88-94), in the years following European colonization of Africa, postcards and other representations of Africans turned them into visual, often titillating, objects; indeed, "[t]he world of colonialism is a men's world" (p. 94). Postcard images of Middle Eastern women had that same quality.

⁵ "I Dream of Jeannie" was a United States television program that aired in the 1960s. It featured a blonde "genie" wearing a pink supposed harem outfit and her American astronaut master.

(Kabbani 1986: 59).⁶ Anne Norton (1991) analyzed gender and sexuality imagery in connection with the first Gulf war. The Arabs, personified by Saddam Hussein, were not only hypermasculine, but also perversely masculine. President George H. W. Bush drove home this message through his usual mispronunciation of "Saddam." Images of homosexual rape and deviant sexuality re-emerged in the American media as the confrontation with Iraq escalated during 2002 and 2003.

Leila Ahmed (1982) extended Said's argument to North American feminists, who appear not to recognize that the same male scholars and administrators who constructed Orientalism also constructed patriarchy and developed scholarship depicting women as inferior.⁷ Rather than joining Middle Eastern women in solidarity and sisterhood, and recognizing their agency and activism, they view them as victims of a backward religion and still more backward men, thus implicitly supporting the political agendas of Western governments (Thobani 2002).

Lila Abu-Lughod (2002), Saba Gul Khattak (2002), and Stabile and Kumar (2005) have pointed to the role of the United States in fostering the Taliban and other reactionary Islamic groups as a counterpoise to Soviet influence in Afghanistan, and reiterated the importance of oil to American interests in the country. But after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Afghan women had to be saved through American military action (see also Kensinger 2003: 15-16). Abu-Lughod argued that we must be suspicious of reducing Muslim women's oppression to culture, or to what they wear; instead, we need to look at the much larger political picture. Khattak reminded us that "it matters little to Afghan women made refugees by the bombing whether the bombs were manufactured in the US or in the former Soviet Union; what matters to them is that bombs forced them to flee their homes" (2002: 22). Stabile and Kumar commented that foregrounding business interests as a rationale for war is bad for business, but that "Afghan women, in contrast, work well, especially when they are not allowed to speak for themselves" (2005: 777).

To summarize thus far, then, the tropes I will discuss below form a readily accessible part of U.S. popular and high culture which can be drawn upon for use, be it in films and television, cartoons, comedy routines, news articles and analysis, and justification of policy. As a centuries-old body of what purports to be knowledge, the

⁶ Kabbani here is discussing the works of Sir Richard Burton, which emphasized the perverse sexuality of both men and women in Asia (including the Middle East). She links that emphasis on sexuality to Burton's racism. Elsewhere in the book she finds other Europeans, both writers and painters, also to be racist and misogynist. In the context of Empire, Europeans projected their repressed sexualities onto the Other.

⁷ From the context it is clear that Ahmed means all North American feminists. For example, she states "...American women 'know' that Muslim women are overwhelmingly oppressed without being able to define the specific content of that oppression, in the same way that they 'know' that Muslims - Arabs, Iranians, or whatever - are ignorant, backward, irrational, and uncivilized. These are 'facts' manufactured in Western culture, by the same men who have also littered the culture with 'facts' about Western women and how inferior and irrational *they* are" (p. 523). She discusses the centuries-long conflict between the West and the Middle East, the same context within which Said sets *Orientalism*. Then she states, "Although Western feminists have succeeded in rejecting their culture's myths about (Western) women and their innate inferiority and irrationality, they continue to subscribe to and perpetuate those myths about Muslims, including Muslim women, and about harems, as well as to assume superiority toward the women within them" (p. 526). Even though the stereotyping so common in the West is distressing, one could argue that Ahmed herself is guilty of the same kinds of overgeneralizations she deplores among Western women.

beliefs and representations are there to be drawn upon as needed. Moreover, the Orientalist dichotomization between Islam and the West has led many Americans, feminists included, to support agendas of rescuing Muslim women from Muslim men through military action.⁸ As we will see, military action did not improve the lives of Muslim women in Afghanistan and Iraq. Indeed, it seems to have made things worse.

Three Tropes

Three tropes together tell the stories that explain 9/11 and justify American intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq. Each one is a contrast, a dichotomy, and each dichotomy is a hierarchy. In each case, the good is the American, and the bad, the Other, the deviant, is the Arab or Middle Easterner or Muslim (they are all the same to most Americans).⁹ The first trope contrasts liberated American women with oppressed Muslim/Arab/Middle Eastern women. The second trope contrasts natural and wholesome American male sexuality with abnormal Arab male sexuality. The third trope contrasts innocent and good Americans with evil, violent, savage Arabs. In various ways American concepts of appropriate and natural gender roles and sexuality are contrasted with the unnatural and inappropriate gender roles and sexualities attributed to the Arabs. Moreover, as in any process of dichotomization, "we" are diverse individuals while "they" are all the same. Americans place a high valuation upon individualism (even while conforming), so that the imagined lack of individuality upon the part of the Arabs is in itself grounds for their being condemned as uncivilized.

The images I chose to illustrate these three tropes come from a much larger collection. Over many years of teaching and research in ethnic and women's studies, I became interested in the representations that so clearly formed Americans' views of reality. Because I also teach Middle East studies, representations of Middle Eastern peoples made up a substantial part of my collection. In the aftermath of 9/11, I began to perceive that the gendered, raced, and sexualized images presented here fell into patterns that reflected a power relationship in favor of the West.

⁸ Ann Russo asserted in a post on October 21, 2006, on the Women's Studies List Serve moderated by Joan Korenman at the University of Maryland at Baltimore (WMST-L@LISTSERV.UMD.EDU) that the "Feminist Majority Foundation's campaign to 'Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan' supported the invasion of Afghanistan." I examined the FMF's materials on their webpage and in *Ms. Magazine*, together with Eleanor Smeal's testimony in October, 2001, before the U.S. Congress. I was unable to find explicit words supporting a military attack as such. However, Smeal's address compared the reconstruction task in Afghanistan to that in post-World War II Japan and Germany, where military invasion followed by occupation was a reality. A special issue of *Ms.* in Spring, 2002, entitled "A Coalition of Hope" echoed themes of rescue. A common theme described American feminists - to be sure, often in collaboration with Afghan feminists - working to relieve the "plight" of Afghan women; the cover of the issue showed a woman or girl, her head covered, peering out from the darkness.

⁹ At any rate this usually has been my experience, even with educated people. There are anti-war activists who have taken the trouble to learn, such as Kensinger (2003). However, Iranians find it troubling to be perceived as Arabs, Christian Arabs are not happy to be mistaken for Muslims, and so on; and they all find it distressing to be viewed as backward.

Trope 1: Liberated American Women versus Oppressed Arab Women

Middle Eastern women's oppression is shown most vividly in their clothing—some sort of *hijab* or veil: the *chador*, the *abaya*, the *burqa*.¹⁰ Such garments symbolize to Americans that Middle Eastern women are all the same, oppressed, repressed, suppressed, voiceless, faceless, without agency or action. Surely they have no individuality or freedom. In contrast, American women can do and wear what they want. They are free. They can have any careers they want, and are equal to men in all respects. American women's freedom from oppression is shown most vividly by their uncovered smiling faces, their bare heads, and very frequently their nearly bare bodies.¹¹ Image 1) comes from an advertisement for subscriptions that ran in the *Los Angeles Times* in Spring, 2000. Note the contrast between light and dark in the women's coloring and clothing, the backgrounds, and the frames at the bottom of the photograph. The bikini-clad American women are, of course, white and blonde, standing on a southern California beach. The other women, brunette in coloring and covered in black, appear to be in Iran or possibly Afghanistan.

Image 1

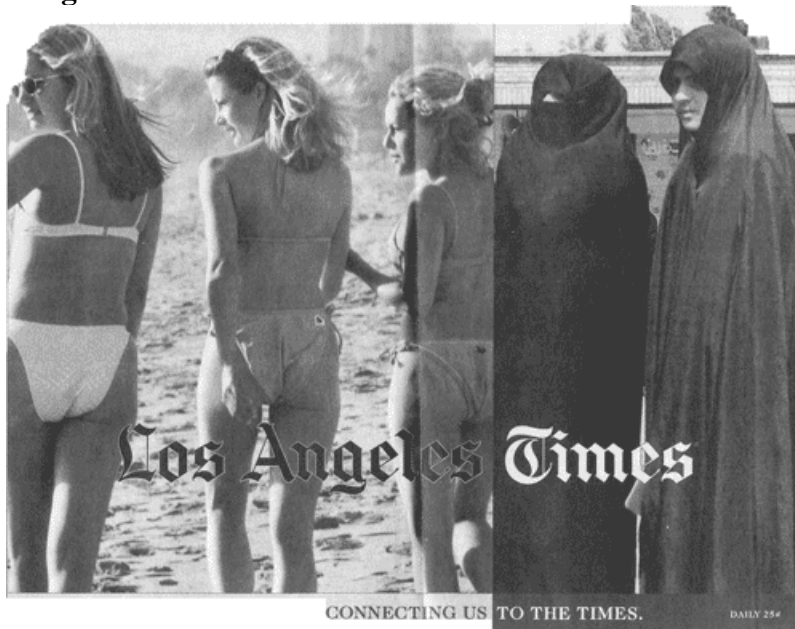


Image 2) is an editorial cartoon which appeared in Fall, 2002, in the *Los Angeles Times*. Here, wearing *hijab* is equated with illiteracy, lack of civil rights, and religiously sanctioned violence.

¹⁰ The English word veil has multiple referents in Arabic and other Middle Eastern languages. Its rough Arabic equivalent is *hijab*, which means modest dress that covers the hair, arms, and legs, and usually conceals the shape of the body. It does not always imply a face covering. As a generic term, it can refer to a headscarf worn with modified Western dress; the *abaya*, a black cloak worn in Iraq and the Arabian peninsula; the *chador*, an Iranian style often but not always black; the *burka* or *burqa*, an Afghan style, worn in many colors, but often blue; and other styles and names in other places and times.

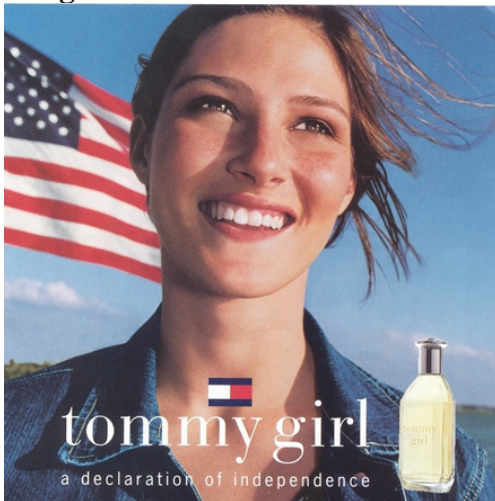
¹¹ A North American feminist critique might argue that women's display of their nearly bare bodies is but participation in their own subordination through objectification in the male gaze.

Image 2



Image 3), from a department store flyer, presents a very nice contrast to image 2). Tommy Girl, a commercial image, is fair, bareheaded, barefaced, and smiling. She looks wholesome and free, the ideal American woman, as she patriotically declares her independence, with the American flag in the background.¹²

Image 3



Trope 2: Wholesome American Male Sexuality versus Abnormal Arab Male Sexuality

This is one of the oldest themes contrasting Orient and Occident and is intimately connected to various conquest themes. As Anne Norton (1991: 28) noted, Sir Richard Burton, in his "Terminal Essay" to his translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* described a "Sotadic Zone," characterized by the normalization and high frequency of male homosexual practices. This zone ran from the Circum-Mediterranean through the Middle East, through China, Japan, and Central Asia, across the Pacific to the Americas [evidently it did not include sub-Saharan Africa] (Burton 1886: 206-207). Burton's

¹² The American flag, fabric of freedom, only appears to contrast with the Muslim *hijab*, fabric of oppression. In fact, both may be viewed as instances of hegemonic control practices.

Sotadic Zone thus comprised most of the world's peoples, and by the time Burton published his translation, most of them had been conquered by Westerners. The *Nights* were privately published for Burton's colleagues, but since these were learned men, it is clear that they were among the men Leila Ahmed cited as creators of "facts" about Middle Eastern peoples in Western (including American) culture.

In the Orientalist trope, the Other male is either effeminate (frequently conflated with homosexual) or hypermasculine, and thus dangerous. For example, (east) Asian men are "without any of the defining characteristics of dominant masculinity - white skin, hairy chests, beards and facial hair, big arms and big muscles. Quite the contrary: we have all the characteristics of something Other, something more feminine in the normative eye of Western sexuality: slender and relatively hairless bodies, differently textured and coloured skin and straight hair. In Western public representations of masculinity we are defined in terms of absence, lack or silence" (Luke 1997).

Alternatively, the Other male may be hypermasculine and menacing. He is the Black rapist of myth, savage and in need of control and punishment. Shohat locates, in the Western rescue fantasy of Hollywood's Orient, that same rapist, now the Arab (1990: 41). Norton, too, finds that exaggeratedly masculine figure in Western media, and links it to the harem motif: "The harem is pictured as a prison for women held captive by male violence" (1991: 27).

It seems to me that the effeminate or homosexual image is more likely to be found where the Other male has been conquered (his country penetrated) and rendered harmless. The hypermasculine and dangerous Other male, then, is the one who still needs to be conquered, whose women need to be rescued. But, as the Middle Eastern case shows, the two motifs may both be present, both to promote conquest and to insult the Other male.

The normative American male is attractive, clean-cut, usually depicted as white, and always heterosexual, as we see in image 4), another image from a department store advertisement.

Image 4

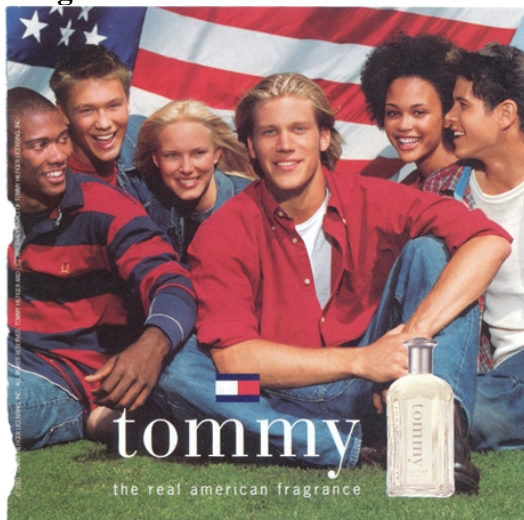


Image 5) is in total contrast. On this newsmagazine cover, a swarthy and unshaven Iraqi man enthusiastically embraces and kisses a grimacing and decidedly uncomfortable American soldier just after the fall of Baghdad in April, 2003. The soldier appears to interpret the embrace and kiss as a homosexual advance; most Americans would read the image in the same way.

Image 5



Trope 3: The Innocent American versus the Evil Other

The significance of this trope emerged most forcefully after September 11, when so many Americans asked, "Why do they hate us?" Few imagined that there could be any connection between the actions of the United States government or corporations on the one hand and anti-American attitudes or acts on the other. Perceiving themselves and their values as good, they could only think of the American role worldwide as benevolent. Thus, anti-American behaviors and attitudes must surely be irrational and unfounded, the product of evil people and an evil civilization. In a press conference on October 11, 2001, President George W. Bush echoed the same theme: "How do I respond when I see that in some Islamic countries there is vitriolic hatred for America? I'm amazed ... that people would hate us.... Because I know how good we are...." ¹³

¹³This view is not new. In describing President Jimmy Carter's meeting with Christian Bourguet (a French lawyer serving as mediator) over the hostage situation in Iran in 1980, Edward W. Said noted that "(t)o him Americans were by definition innocent and in a sense outside history.... What mattered now was that Iranians were terrorists.... Indeed, anyone who disliked America ... was dangerous and sick" (1981: xxv-xxvi). It was outside his construction of reality to conceive of the situation any other way.

It's hard to know exactly what motivates U.S. corporate and political leaders. It may indeed be the case that some are totally unaware of the impact of their actions in creating foreign reactions. Or, they may know and, constrained by domestic political realities, are unable or unwilling to take risks. Alternatively, they may be driven by ideological or strategic interests, or economic interests, and thus find any foreign

Images of American goodness and innocence are both gendered and raced. Image 6) shows a billboard distributed around Los Angeles after the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. American innocence and goodness are fore-grounded here as an angelic little white girl waving an American flag. The caption next to the picture is a plea for unity, one of many that came in the days following the attacks.

Image 6



Comparison of the billboard image with the original (found on the Internet) shows that in this version, the image has been cropped and the light values altered so as to minimize the crowd around the child and enhance her image. In the original, the crowd is ethnically varied, and little Alana Milawski sits on her brunet dark-skinned father's shoulders at a memorial rally held in the Las Vegas, Nevada, area the day after the bombings.

Image 7) represents Alana's opposite: dark, male, evil, violent, and savage. It is an editorial cartoon which clearly shows the Arabs as nothing but terrorists, always and from infancy irrational and utterly evil.

Image 7



reactions to be essentially irrelevant; here one might place contemporary neo-conservatives. Tarak Barkawi (2006: 103-107) has suggested yet another possibility, that policy makers may view actions such as conquests as "win-win" situations; "we" conquer "you" for our strategic interests, but "we" also bring "you" the benefits of democracy, capitalism, or economic development.

September 11, 2001: The United States under Attack

Americans woke to a horrible shock on Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001, as over and over television stations repeated the scene of jetliners flying into skyscrapers. The events of that day were shocking to Americans. It was not simply that so many people were killed, or that two entire buildings were completely destroyed. The attacks represented a violation of American security, almost immediately compared to Pearl Harbor as an instance of foreign perfidy. After the initial shock and grief came an immense outpouring of patriotism. Flags flew from houses and motor vehicles, flag stickers appeared on all kinds of windows, flags were imprinted upon dry cleaner bags and the like, and red, white, and blue, stars and stripes, instantly became fashionable.

Editorial cartoons and other images featured predictably raced and gendered images. Image 8) shows the innocent American motif again, as an archetypal white middle-class family of husband, wife, son, and daughter are depicted as targets, facing a dark void. The caption accompanying this image suggests that the terrorists committed their acts because they hated liberty and other American values, and numerous would-be experts echoed this theme.

Image 8



Image 9) repeats the unity and patriotic themes that became so prevalent, and again is both raced and gendered. This mural was painted on the side of a building in a fashionable business and shopping district of Los Angeles. It was meant to commemorate the World Trade Center and Pentagon bombings, as the flames and the caption in the lower right side indicate. The woman is African-American, or possibly mixed-race; she is, at any rate, not obviously white, in contrast to most of the American female representations. However, she is a free and brave soldier, an image that emerged in the media during the first Gulf war (Enloe 1993: 170-173), and was repeated in the second. One could view her as a kind of token representative of all Americans, a non-white woman, or, alternatively, implicitly contrasting with the invisible, passive Middle Eastern woman.

Image 9

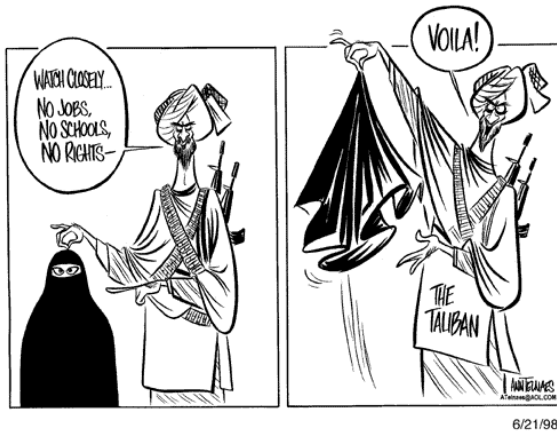
After the destruction in New York City and Washington, blame was almost immediately placed upon Osama bin Laden, a Saudi Arabian expatriate who headed a loose organization called al-Qaeda, which was based in Afghanistan and supported by the Taliban government there. Thus, the primary military and political objectives of Operation Enduring Freedom, the war on Afghanistan which began on October 7, 2001, were to punish Osama bin Laden, weaken al-Qaeda, and remove the Taliban from power.

Operation Enduring Freedom

Long before the events of September 11, 2001, Taliban repression of Afghan women was well known. A petition on behalf of Afghan women circulated throughout the Internet many times (see Kensinger, 2003: 13-14). Not only the Feminist Majority Foundation, but also Cherie Blair, Laura Bush (in a radio address on November 17, 2001), and Mavis Leno, spoke out in favor of Afghan women's rights (PM's Wife in Afghan Plea 2001; Carlson 1999; McNamara 1998; 2000). We learned through these women, and through the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), that women were required to wear the *burqa*, that they were not permitted to attend school or go out to work, that even cosmetics and white shoes were forbidden, and that deviance would be punished very harshly. However, we learned very little, except from RAWA, about how the Taliban and other conservative Islamic groups had gotten into power, and what some of the global and local economic and political issues were. Ironically, the East Los Angeles high school students described by Mary McNamara (2000) are multiply disadvantaged by ethnicity, income, and a variety of personal and family problems, yet they were encouraged to focus on the plight of women in Afghanistan.

Partly because the Taliban seemed to be a rather amorphous and anonymous entity, and partly because Afghan and other Middle Eastern women are always viewed as oppressed above all by their clothing, the *burqa* emerged as the principal symbol of women's oppression in Afghanistan, of the oppression of all Afghans. Thus, we saw many photographs and cartoons of *burqas*. Image 10) is an editorial cartoon depicting women's rights under the Taliban, once again equating wearing *hijab* with lack of rights, and implicitly linking lack of covering with freedom.

Image 10



Nevertheless, after the Taliban were replaced by a weak coalition government of the so-called "Northern Alliance" (former *mujahidin*, "freedom fighters" supported by the United States beginning in the era of Soviet influence in Afghanistan), much was said about women's liberation in Afghanistan. Beauty salons were opened, and women even traveled from the United States to bring Afghan women the benefits of cosmetics (Contract 2002). Newsmagazines and newspapers carried headlines such as "Lifting the Veil" (*Time*, December 3, 2001, cover), "One Afghan Woman's Determination Can't Be Veiled" (*Los Angeles Times*, June 9, 2002, p. A5), and "Bare Faced Resistance" (*The Guardian*, July 20, 2002).

And so, as image 11) shows so dramatically, Afghan women were liberated from the *burqa*, that symbol of their oppression.

Image 11



But Osama bin Laden was nowhere to be found, dead or alive. Perhaps he fled dressed in a *burqa* (image 12), appropriately feminized, and deprived figuratively of all rights.

Image 12



The comparison was meant to be insulting (see Rosenberg 2002: 460-461), and there were even more insulting metaphors of conquering masculinity in editorial cartoons I surveyed. Osama bin Laden became, to quote numerous political humorists, Osama "bin Forgotten."

The Bush administration adduced numerous reasons for its interest in Iraq, among them the supposed presence of weapons of mass destruction in that country. There were hints that somehow Saddam Hussein supported Osama bin Laden and his activities, and many Americans continue to believe that the two men were linked.

Operation Iraqi Freedom

The gender discourse on Iraq differed somewhat from that on Afghanistan. For one thing, Saddam Hussein was a well-known demonic figure who could easily be made to represent all of Iraq. Many of the images of Saddam that emerged during the first Gulf war (the invasion of Kuwait by Iraqi forces in 1990 and its aftermath) were readily re-used (see Norton 1991 for a discussion of these representations). Also, most Americans had no sense at all of what women's lives in Iraq were like. Some imagined that the situation was much as it was in Afghanistan, and pictures of women in *abayas* abounded in the news media. During Fall, 2002, the Young Republicans at my university put up a pro-war display in a central area of campus. One of their signs read, "If this campus was in Baghdad, would there be women and minorities here?" The implication was that women's situation in Iraq was the same as it was in Afghanistan.

An organization of Iraqi women in exile, Women for a Free Iraq, maintained a web site; its members met with members of the United States government, held press conferences, and published articles in newspapers. They were very effective in publicizing Saddam's misdeeds, particularly those against women. However, they were linked to Kurdish resistance organizations and to the Iraqi National Congress, the exile organization favored by the Bush administration, so they were a pro-war organization. In the main, thus, they echoed the rescuing women theme that the Bush administration promoted for both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Both anti-war and pro-war groups emphasized the suffering of Iraqi women and children: the anti-war organizations maintained that this existed because of the economic sanctions against Iraq and Allied bombing in the so-called no-fly zones, while the pro-war groups blamed it on Saddam. Image 13) is a typical example of the representations of suffering Iraqis under the sanctions regime and bombings. This image was created by an anti-war organization, but accounts of Saddam's atrocities could easily be found, for example, on the U.S. State Department's web site.

Image 13

**ARE YOU WILLING TO KILL
HER TO GET SADDAM?**



STOP THE WAR ON IRAQ

Tell the White House what you think (202)456-1111
www.NoMoreVictims.org

A bomb dropped by a U.S. plane south of Basra, Iraq, blew off this little girl's arm.

Editorial cartoons echoed the same themes found during the first Gulf War. Images 14) and 15) depict Saddam as deviantly sexed: in the first, he is feminized as a nightclub dancer, and in the second he invites homosexual rape. (Note the position of his gun).

Image 14



Image 15



Operation Iraqi Freedom began on March 19, 2003, with the explicit goal of regime change. Lady Liberty went to war (image 16).¹⁴

Image 16



Fresh new flags replaced the tattered ones on cars and trucks. "Shock and awe" were in plentiful supply on nightly news broadcasts. Masculine imagery and language abounded in both broadcast and print media, for example, "U.S. Thrust Meant to Send Message" (*Los Angeles Times* headline, April 6, 2003), and the images of exploding artillery. Iraq

¹⁴ This cartoon originally appeared in a Mexican newspaper, and Mexicans may very well have read it as satirical. Given the abundance of Lady Liberty images right after 9/11, I would argue that Americans would have seen it very differently.

was quickly conquered and occupied, and Saddam went into hiding. A widely circulated image showed a statue of Saddam in Baghdad being pulled down.

In contrast to the suffering, passive Iraqi women, most still clad in *abayas*, images of American women soldiers, brave, free, and self-sacrificing--and white and attractive -- were common. The helicopter pilot (image 17) left her children to fight for American and Iraqi freedom. (Note her make-up and hairstyle).

Image 17



Other white women in the military also received a lot of attention for their supposed bravery and devotion to duty. For example, Private Jessica Lynch, a young, blonde white woman, was injured, captured, and had to be rescued. Almost immediately she became the object of military myth-making, the author/subject of a book entitled *I Am a Soldier, Too: The Jessica Lynch Story*, and the subject of an NBC film ("Saving Jessica Lynch").¹⁵

As Cynthia Enloe reminded us in writing about the first Gulf war, the contrast between American women soldiers and veiled Arab women implies American superiority and justifies intervention. At the same time, it also ignores the very real sexism and racism that exist within the American military (1993: 170-173), and within the larger U.S. society. After all, a volunteer military requires a disadvantaged population that can't find jobs, education, housing, and health benefits anywhere else; thus about half of the women serving during the first Gulf war were African American (Morgan *et al.* 2003).¹⁶

¹⁵ The BBC revealed just how much the Pentagon's reports about Lynch were news management rather than news reporting. Most of the story turned out to be pure fiction, designed to contrast the good American with the savage Arab (Special Report: Iraq 2003; Kampfner 2003). Moreover, Private Shoshana Johnson, a young African American woman in the same supply unit, had experiences similar to those of Jessica Lynch; however, as a black woman already the Other, she received almost no media attention and a smaller disability pension (Fairness to POW Questioned 2003).

¹⁶ Both Private Lynch and Private Johnson had joined the military because of financial need.

Summary and Conclusion

Although rescuing Muslim women was not the only justification for war in either Afghanistan or Iraq, gender formed an important part of the story. Three contrasts, rooted deep in the West's colonial and imperial past, were drawn upon, once again, to sell a war agenda. One of these was the free American woman versus the oppressed Middle Eastern woman. The second was healthy American male sexuality versus perverse Middle Eastern male sexuality. The third contrasted the innocent American (represented as female) with the savage Middle Easterner (represented as male). A whole series of gendered images, both verbal and pictorial, pervaded accounts of the fighting.

Today, the futures of both Afghanistan and Iraq remain uncertain; clear military victories did not lead to political stability or democracy. Moreover, it seems that women have not been liberated in either country. Their personal security is tenuous, and their political and other rights remain precarious (see Coursen-Neff 2003; King 2003; Cole and Cole 2004; Dehghanpisheh *et al.* 2005; and Moreau and Yousafzai 2006)). Rescuing Muslim women, despite President Bush's assertions (Chen and Reynolds 2004), proved to be no more than hollow rhetoric.

If Americans genuinely wish to improve the situation for women in Middle Eastern countries, they need fundamentally to change their approach. This process must begin with a critical examination of their dichotomous views of American and Middle Eastern people, one which highlights the ways in which these views support military violence, as this paper has shown.

Beyond that, as Cynthia Enloe suggests, rethinking American foreign policy means taking a feminist view: "Which notions of manliness are shaping this policy discussion?" "Will the gap between women's and men's access to economic and political influence be widened or narrowed by this particular policy option?" (Enloe 2000: 5). Last, North American feminists will need to abandon their sense of superiority, their view that they know more than Middle Eastern women what the latter need or should desire.

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Appendix

The Images and Captions

1. Los Angeles Times Advertisement, April, 2000.
2. Women in Hijab Have No Rights, Cartoon by Signe Wilkinson, November, 2002.
3. Department Store Perfume Flyer, n.d.
4. Department Store Perfume Flyer, n.d.
5. Newsweek Cover, April, 2003.
6. American Innocence Personified in Alana Milawski, September, 2001. Photograph by Ethan Miller. Billboard by ClearChannel. Image by Permission of The Foundation for a Better Life.
7. Middle Eastern Male as Terrorist, Cartoon by Ed Stein; n.d.
8. American Family as Targets, Cartoon by Doug Marlette, September, 2001.
9. Mural on Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, Photograph by the Author, Fall, 2001.

10. There's No Woman Under the Burqa, Cartoon by Ann Telnaes, June, 1998.
11. An Afghan Woman Lifts Her Burqa, November, 2001. Photograph by Laura Rauch. By Permission of AP/Wide World Photos.
12. Osama Escapes in a Burqa, Cartoon by Bob Gorrell, 2001.
13. Asraa' Mizyad, Wounded by American Bombs Before the US Invasion in 2003. Photograph by Alan Pogue of the Texas Center for Documentary Photography; Poster by No More Victims. By Permission of No More Victims.
14. Iraqi Horror Inspection Show, Cartoon by J.D. Crow, April, 2002.
15. Inspect This, Cartoon by Daryl Cagle, September, 2002. By permission of CagleCartoons.com.
16. Lady Liberty goes to war, Cartoon by Angel Boligan in El Universal, Mexico City, March, 2003.
17. Time cover, March, 2003.