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Unveiling imperialism: media, gender and the war on Afghanistan

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> Fighting brutality against women and children is not the expression of a specific culture; it is the acceptance of our common humanity – a commitment shared by people of good will on every continent. Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. Yet the terrorists who helped rule that country now plot and plan in many countries. And they must be stopped. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women. (Bush, 2001)

In the weeks that followed the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, US media suddenly discovered what left-leaning media, women's rights organizations, and sections of the European press had been saying for over five years: that the Taliban regime in Afghanistan was, quite literally, killing women. Subsequently, a host of what President George Bush delicately referred to as 'women of cover' paraded across the pages of the corporate media. *Burqa*-clad women were featured on the cover of the *New York Times* magazine (in a feature story that, interestingly enough, had absolutely nothing to say about women), as well as *Business Week*, *Newsweek*, *Time* and other general interest magazines.

This level of attention to women's oppression in Afghanistan was certainly a welcome shift, given that the issue had been barely covered by the mainstream media or even publicly discussed by policy makers in the past. Yet this focus on women's liberation in Afghanistan, we argue, was little more than a cynical ploy – it served as a one of the pillars on which

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elites sought to sell the war to the US public. As the 'War on Terror' continues, and as the Bush administration turns its rapacious eye on other 'rogue' nations, the use of women, children and their 'human rights' as justification for US aggression needs to be interrogated and challenged.

In what follows, we offer a three-part analysis of our topic. In the first, we provide an overview of recent conflicts in Afghanistan, focusing in particular on the US's economic and strategic interests in the region and its role in supporting and funding Islamic fundamentalism. This context, absent almost entirely from media accounts of Afghan women, is crucial to understanding their plight in all its material complexity. We then turn to news media frameworks and examine the ways in which Afghan women figure in wider agendas, particularly the circumstances in which they become visible in a society as sexist as the US. The central framework employed to justify the US war was thoroughly Orientalist; it constructed the West as the beacon of civilization with an obligation to tame the Islamic world and liberate its women. This served to erase not only the political struggles of women in Afghanistan against both the Northern Alliance and the Taliban, but those of women in the West as well who, contrary to Orientalist claims about the eternal virtues of Western civilization, have had to organize and fight for what rights they enjoy today. We then turn to the outcome of the war and situation of Afghan women today. That they still endure terrible conditions bolsters our argument that the issue of women's liberation was used as a cover for US intervention – when we strip off this rhetorical veil, we find the ugly face of US imperialism.

The US and Islamic fundamentalism

In the late 1970s and 1980s, Afghanistan became the very hot battlefield upon which Cold War rivalry was fought out. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and the US used a proxy army to fight the invaders. The series of events that precipitated Soviet invasion was as follows: in April 1978, Daud Chan Mohammed, a member of a ruling family who had himself come to power through a coup, was deposed and killed by army officers who supported the pro-Soviet People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA).[1] In the aftermath of this assassination, a broad coalition government was formed and controlled by one of the factions of the PDPA. Similar to some of its Stalinist counterparts in other countries, the PDPA, after coming to power, passed a series of reforms. Since the PDPA did not have a social base and because the government in Kabul was isolated from the rest of the country, they had little support outside of urban regions for reform programs. A resistance movement was soon organized by conservative Islamic groups under the rubric of the 'mujahideen' (holy warriors). In the chaos that ensued, as Tariq Ali notes, 'a bitter factional struggle led to the victory of a Pol-Pot faction led by Hafizullah Amin, who embarked on a campaign of massive repression' (2001: n.p.).

The US, taking advantage of this situation, began to fund the *mujahideen* as a way to curtail Soviet influence in the region. As former CIA director Robert Gates (1996) noted, aid to the mujahideen began in June 1979, months before the Soviet invasion. Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national security adviser, in a now famous interview, explained this funding and support prior to any act of Soviet aggression in the following terms:

> According to the official version of history, CIA aid to the mujahideen began during 1980, that is to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan [in] December 1979. But the reality, secretly guarded until now, is completely otherwise: indeed, it was July 3, 1979, that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. And that very day, I wrote a note to the president in which I explained to him that in my opinion this was going to induce a Soviet military intervention. . . . The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter: We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam war. (Frank, 1998: n.p.)

Financial and technical support for the mujahideen was predicated on a strategy of drawing the USSR into a protracted war that would sow internal dissent and divert resources, just as Vietnam had done for the US. The plan worked and soon after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan.

In order to defeat the Soviet Union, the US supported groups with reactionary social goals with full knowledge of their violent and repressive tendencies, just as it had in several countries such as the Congo, Chile, Guatemala and Indonesia. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, for instance, received large sums of aid from the US, even though as Tim Weiner notes, Hekmatyar's 'followers first gained attention by throwing acid in the faces of women who refused to wear the veil. CIA and State Department officials I have spoken with call him "scary," "vicious," "a fascist," "definite dictatorship material"' (1990: 149).[2] Support for the mujahideen, which started under Carter, was embraced by the Reagan administration – Ronald Reagan even referred to the mujahideen as 'freedom fighters' against the communist threat, a description that US media were swift to uncritically adopt.

With the help of Pakistani intelligence, the US armed and trained mujahideen fighters from Afghanistan and elsewhere in camps set up in Pakistan and Afghanistan. One of these recruits was a Saudi businessman, Osama bin Laden, who made contacts at these camps that enabled him to form al Qaeda in the early 1990s. Throughout the 1980s, the US supplied large quantities of arms such as C-4 plastic explosives, long-range sniper rifles, wire-guided anti-tank missiles, Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, as well as extensive satellite reconnaissance data on the location of Soviet targets

(Coll, 1992: A1). The US not only armed and trained the Islamists, they also poured money into the region: some US $3 billion, more than any other aid program to insurgent groups, was spent on this effort.

Ultimately, the Soviet Union was defeated, externally and internally. When it began its withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the country had been devastated. Over 2 million Afghans had been killed during the Soviet occupation, half a million had been maimed and Afghanistan had become the most heavily land-mined country in the world. Women's political situation immediately began to worsen. To fully comprehend the gender apartheid instituted by the Taliban beginning in 1996, one must first understand what their situation was prior to the rise of the mujahideen and Islamic fundamentalism. Even in the early 1990s, large numbers of Afghan women in urban centers participated in the workforce and in public life. Afghanistan's Constitution, written in 1964, ensured basic rights for women such as universal suffrage and equal pay. Since the 1950s, girls in Kabul and other cities attended schools. Half of university students were women, and women made up 40 percent of Afghanistan's doctors, 70 percent of its teachers and 30 percent of its civil servants. A small number of women even held important political posts as members of Parliament and judges. Most women did not wear the burqa. Even many devout Muslim women wore headscarves and long dresses, but not the burqa (Smeal, 2001).

Attacks on women began in 1989, when mujahideen leaders based in Peshawar, Pakistan, issued a *fatwa* (or a religious decree) ordering the assassination of women who worked for humanitarian organizations. Shortly after this, women were ordered to wear the *hijab*, a black garment that covers the entire body with a veil on the head. In 1990, women were forbidden from attending school. To underscore the point, a Peshawar girls' school was sprayed with bullets (Goodwin and Neuwirth, 2001: A19). The US, more or less responsible for the situation in Afghanistan, chose not to act. Rather than redirect resources from funding insurgents to rebuilding the ravaged country's infrastructure, the US abandoned the people who had fought their proxy war with the USSR. A power struggle among the various misogynistic factions of the mujahideen ensued, which exacerbated already dire conditions. Then, in 1992, an unstable government called the Mujahideen Government of the Islamic State of Afghanistan emerged as coalition of seven mujahideen parties (Marsden, 1998: 42). Its president, Burhannudin Rabbani, suspended the Constitution and issued religious decrees that prevented women from holding government jobs or jobs in broadcasting, and required them to wear a veil (Goodwin and Neuwirth, 2001: A19). The ascendance of the mujahideen government in 1992, who would later form the Northern Alliance, meant that women's rights were severely curtailed. What rights remained would be summarily denied when the Taliban came to power in 1996.

The Taliban implemented four central policies regarding women. First, women were forbidden to hold jobs. Second, they could not attend schools until the Taliban had come up with a curriculum appropriate for their primary role of bringing up the next generation of Muslims. Third, women were forced to wear burqas, while men had to wear *shalwar kameez* (a long tunic and pants), maintain beards and were not permitted to style their hair. Finally, women were denied freedom of movement. They could only leave their homes if escorted by male relatives and had to avoid contact with male strangers (Marsden, 1998: 88–9). If these rules were transgressed, the religious police would mete out punishments like public beatings and sometimes even death.

Despite these open violations of women's rights, the US supported the Taliban, support that grew out of US efforts to secure a contract for an oil pipeline through Afghanistan that would enable a US-based oil corporation, Unocal, to gain access to Caspian Sea oil (Rashid, 2000: 171–82). Because of these economic interests and the desire not to antagonize the Taliban, the US remained silent when the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996 and began its assault on women. One US diplomat expressed the logic of this silence – and the underlying lack of regard for women's rights – when he observed: 'Taliban will develop like the Saudis did. There will be Aramco, pipelines, an emir, no parliament and lots of Sharia law. We can live with that' (quoted in Rashid, 2000: 179). Clearly, Unocal and pipelines took precedence over democracy and women's rights, just as they had in Saudi Arabia, which, despite its atrocious record on women's rights, has long been an ally of the US. The similarities between Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan are striking: Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi strand of Islam resembles the Deobandi Islam of the Taliban and Saudi Arabia helped to finance the schools, or madrassas, where the Taliban were trained. In reality, the Taliban's brand of extreme Islam has no historical roots in Afghanistan. Rather, it is the product of US and Saudi involvement in the region; a fact that directly undermines the idea that the Taliban's repression of women is natural or endemic, and stems from the 'tribal' nature of that society. This is the history and material context completely elided by media accounts of Afghan women.

US politicians and media discover Afghan women

In political discourses about Afghan women, two narrative traditions and practices converge: that of the protection scenario and that of Orientalism. Both traditions draw much of their rhetorical force from discourses of imperialism. The argument about protecting women, used as justification for the bombing of Afghanistan, combines elements of both traditions. Orientalist discourses often employ protection scenarios as justification for imperialist aggression, although Orientalism has a specific colonial history. According to the logic of the protection scenario, women, like the penetrable, feminized territory of the nation-state, must be protected from the predatory advances of some real or imaginary enemy. Susan Jeffords (1991), following Judith Hick Stiehm (1982), describes this as a protection scenario that 'is established through three categories that stand in unstable conjunction with one another: the protected or victim (the person violated by the villain); the threat or villain (the person who attacks the victim); and the protector or hero (the person who protects or rescues the victim or promises such aid' (Stabile, 1994: 107). Cynthia Enloe gives added depth to this analysis, describing it as the 'womenandchildren-protected-by-statesmen' scenario (Enloe, 1992: 96).

Richard Slotkin (1973) traces these 'captivity scenarios' back to 17th-century American cases, in which Native Americans were accused of kidnapping white women and these allegations were used as justification for genocide.[3] Slotkin's historical approach underscores a point also made by Lila Abu-Lughod (2002): that the protection scenario is closely linked to the justificatory narratives of colonialist projects, in which exotic brown women, to paraphrase Gayatri Spivak (1988), must be saved by the civilized (white) hero from some barbaric villain.

As Leila Ahmed (1992) similarly shows, one of the key reasons given to justify British occupation of Egypt in the 1880s was that it was the role of the superior Christian race to rescue and liberate Muslim women from Muslim men. It is beyond the scope of this article to map out the twisted and horrific ideological route this logic has taken in the US (from justification for lynchings of African-Americans in the late 19th and 20th centuries, to recruiting posters for the Second World War that ironically reproduced fascist ideologies of white supremacy by featuring Japanese soldiers as simians threatening white women). What we want to emphasize here is that this has never been an innocent or progressive discourse aimed at improving the lot of women and children – as Enloe (1983, 1990, 1993, 2000; Cohn and Enloe, 2003) has eloquently and repeatedly advised us, militarism by the world's imperialist powers never improves the lives of women and children. Instead, by rendering women the passive grounds for an argument aimed at imperialist domination, the discourse of protection used by politicians and media alike – like the very fundamentalism it purported to attack – denied women any agency in the decision-making processes that affected their everyday lives and futures.

What Edward Said has called an Orientalist framework further consolidated this denial of agency. Said argues that the 'general basis of Orientalist thought is an imaginative and yet drastically polarized geography dividing the world into two unequal parts, the larger, "different" one called the Orient, the other, also known as "our" world, called the occident or the West' (Said, 1981: 4). This imaginative geography is characterized

not only by a polarization between 'us' and 'them', but also by caricatures and stereotypes that bear little resemblance to reality. Said argues that Islam in particular, as well as the Middle East in general, are reduced by this discourse to a monolithic culture governed by religious barbarism. While the West is not defined by its predominant religion (Christianity):

> . . . the world of Islam – its varied societies, histories, and languages notwithstanding – is still mired in religion, primitivism and backwardness. Orientalism posits the West as modern, greater than the sum of its parts, full of enriching contradictions, and yet always 'Western' in its cultural identity. The world of Islam, in stark contrast, is no more than 'Islam,' reducible to a small number of unchanging characteristics, despite the existence of contradictions and experiences of variety that seem on the surface to be as plentiful as those of the West. (Said, 1981: 10)

Similar constructions of the Middle East and Central Asia have recently been used to support the case for military action in the name of a civilizing mission. As Said explains:

> . . . the idea that some races and cultures have a higher aim in life than others . . . gives the more powerful, more developed, more civilized the right therefore to colonize others, not in the name of brute force or raw plunder, both of which are standard components of the exercise, but in the name of a noble ideal. (2000: 574)

In the case of the war on Afghanistan, the 'noble ideal' was the protection of women. Thus the protection scenario and the 'civilizing' mission were brought into an uneasy alliance to justify the destruction of a country's infrastructure in order to protect women.

While the situation of Afghan women had been a subject of some scattered reporting before 11 September 2001, it did not receive nearly the attention it deserved. In 1995, Amnesty International released a report that described the situation of Afghan refugees as the worst in the world – several years of drought had made a terrible situation even worse, particularly for those living in rural regions. The report focused the attention of international relief organizations and human rights organizations on the country. The Feminist Majority had used the internet to publicize the specific abuses of the Taliban regime shortly after the Taliban took power in 1996. Before 11 September 2001, Oxfam International had estimated that 5.5 million Afghans risked experiencing severe food shortages (Oxfam International, 2001); UNICEF was predicting that 100,000 children would die during the winter of 2002 unless food reached them (Relief Web, 2001).

According to any objective standards, life in Afghanistan was harsh beyond comprehension. Yet until Afghan women proved rhetorically useful, their tragic circumstances merited little coverage in the mainstream media. In 1999, for example, journalists wrote only 29 newspaper articles on women in Afghanistan. From 1 January 2000 to 11 September 2001, a period of 18 months, only 15 newspaper articles appeared in mainstream US newspapers. If we compare this dearth of coverage to the 179 articles on Jenna and Barbara Bush, and 113 articles on the destruction of the Buddha statues by the Taliban that appeared during the same period, the silence around the situation of Afghan women appears even more deafening. Of course, from 12 September 2001 to 1 January 2002, 93 newspaper articles appeared – three times the number of articles that appeared in 1999 and six times the number that appeared in the 18 months before 11 September 2001.

Afghan women were even more invisible in broadcast media during the same time frame. In 1999, there were only 37 programs; from 1 January 2000 to 11 September 2001, there were 33 programs (compared to over 1000 programs on Jenna and Barbara Bush and 63 programs on the destruction of statues of Buddha by the Taliban). From 12 September 2001 to 1 January 2002, these numbers sharply increased to 628 broadcast programs. On the face of it, these figures should not surprise critics of the media: when it comes to 'breaking' news, craven news media take their leads from political elites. And these figures also support our contention that suffering women are subjects for political and public concern only insofar as their suffering can be used to advance the interests of US elites.[4] Normally, 'cultural treasures' like the Buddha statues and puff pieces about the puerile antics of the Bush daughters merit more attention than the suffering of women and children.

After 11 September 2001, coverage of Afghan women increased as part of the lead-up to the war. Much of the initial coverage combined the protection scenario with an Orientalist version of Afghan history, suggesting that women's oppression began with the Taliban. The *Washington Post* ran a story on the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) describing the grave risks that the women in that group had to take in order to carry out the tasks of the organization (Schmidt, 2001: A2). The article described the attacks on women's rights since the rise of the Taliban, conveniently overlooking the fact that RAWA had been established in 1977 and founded by women intellectuals led by Meena, who was assassinated in 1987 by Afghan agents associated with US-backed insurgent Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.[5]

Another piece, entitled 'Taliban Regime has Returned Afghan Women to Dark Ages', in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, also reproduced this logic, interviewing several Afghan women who described how the Taliban had destroyed their dreams and aspirations (Basu, 2001: 1D). *US News and World Report* ran a story in which they revealed that women, who had been integrated into the workforce as doctors, professors and government workers, were forced out of their jobs and into their homes by the Taliban (Mulrine, 2001: 33–4). Many of the articles during this period drew graphic

pictures of what life was like for women under the Taliban. While these stories offered compelling glimpses into the restricted lives of Afghan women, it is not a coincidence that they begin to appear in such volume prior to and during the US-led war. It is also not an accident that these stories focused on the Taliban while uniformly ignoring the rise of fundamentalism in 1989, as a consequence of earlier US intervention in the region. To include such background would contradict much of the arsenal of war propaganda launched by the Bush administration.[6]

Overall, coverage converged around two issues: the burqa and women's access to education, largely excluding attention to a horrific refugee situation, which could only be worsened by the coming war. After the downfall of the Taliban, the media were flooded with images of women ripping off their veils. The *New York Times* wrote of gleeful women who were finally free to pursue their lives. Describing the experience of one woman, the author states, '[s]he strode up the steps tentatively at first, her body covered from face to foot by blue cotton. As she neared the door, she flipped the cloth back over her head, revealing round cheeks, dark ringlets of hair and the searching brown eyes of a student' (Rodhe, 2001: 5). *USA Today* described a similar scene of liberation: 'Six of them shed the enveloping burqas that the Taliban forces all women to wear, threw them on the fire and lit the way for their rescuers' (Wiseman and Kelly, 2001: 10A). Magazine coverage followed suit. *Time* magazine featured a photo spread of Afghan women without veils, followed by a short article claiming that the US victory was the 'greatest pageant of mass liberation since the fight for suffrage' (Gibbs, 2001: 32). According to the article, the American liberators had allowed these women to emerge 'from the dark cellars of house arrest' and throw off 'their floor length shrouds'. Such scenes, the article concluded, were a 'reminder of reasons the war was worth fighting beyond those of basic self-defense' (Gibbs, 2001: 32). In case the argument wasn't clear enough, a photo spread a few pages later showed a woman with her face exposed surrounded by others with veils, the caption, which spoke for this unveiled woman, read 'Hello Sunshine' (Gibbs, 2001: 39). *Newsweek* ran a similar article titled, 'Now I See the Sunlight' (Liu and Just, 2001: 46) and a caption beneath a picture in another article read 'finally in the light' (Brant, 2001: 7). The veiled semi-theological message was clear: having vanquished the 'evil' Taliban, the American saviors had taken off the Muslim yoke of oppression and moved women, and Afghan society generally, from darkness into light. No matter that the Northern Alliance, which replaced the Taliban, has an equally brutal history.

Time ran a special report on Afghan women on 3 December 2001. The cover had a picture of a woman without a veil and the caption read, 'Lifting the Veil'. The story began, predictably, by describing scenes of women shedding the burqa, which they refer to as the 'body bag for the living' (Lacayo, 2001: 36). However, the report took a cautious approach to the question of liberation, asserting that women were not going to be liberated overnight because ‘Afghan society is tribal and conservative’ (Lacayo, 2001: 36). Although the article questioned the future for women under the US-backed Northern Alliance, it avoided any discussion of the US’s role in fomenting the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the region. The denial of this crucial historical context allows the blame to be placed on Afghan society, constructed as timelessly misogynistic, barbaric and uncivilized.

In this scenario, women’s oppression is ‘natural’ within ‘primitive’ societies, apparently unaffected by repeated invasions and attacks. The flip side of this assumption about ‘tribal’ and uncivilized Afghanistan is that the enlightened US has just as naturally and ahistorically valued women’s rights. Thus the historical narrative of Afghanistan’s record on women’s rights is selective and does not examine Afghan women’s own struggle for equal rights, such as the role of RAWA. Instead, the rise of women’s rights is seen as the result of the external influence of Russians in the late 1970s. These reforms, the article states ‘alienated some in Afghanistan’s tradition-bound society’ (Lacayo, 2001: 44). The article concludes that since ‘Afghanistan is famously resistant to outside interference’, because non-sexist ideas can come only from the outside (read ‘the West’), progress on gender equality is ‘likely to be slow’ (Lacayo, 2001: 48). What is naturalized in this article, as well as others in the mainstream media, in other words, is the rhetoric of the ‘clash of civilizations’ and Orientalist constructions of the East upon which such a clash is predicated.

Numerous articles reflect this ideology of Western supremacy. For instance, an editorial argued that:

> However much we would like to regard women’s liberation as a natural right, it is the product and achievement of a complex, advanced civilization. Recent events remind us that this civilization is fragile, and that its enemies are hostile to freedom for anyone – but especially women. Feminists, more than anyone else, should realize that the West is worth defending. (Young, 2001: B1)

But *Business Week* most lucidly articulated this message. Shortly after the war on Afghanistan began, *Business Week* ran an issue that featured a photograph of an unveiled Afghan woman with the word ‘liberation’ printed above her (Nussbaum, 2001). The cover page declared, ‘the US victory is a defining moment – for the Afghan people, for Western values, and for the cause of moderation in the Muslim world’.

The article continued by arguing that the:

> . . . liberation of Afghanistan from the tyranny of the Taliban is a watershed event that could reverberate for years. The warm embrace by ordinary people of the freedom to do ordinary things is a major victory for Western humanist values. This victory of values, in the long run, may count for far more than the hunt for Osama bin Laden. (Nussbaum, 2001: 32)

Constructed almost wholly within the logic of the ‘clash of civilizations,’ the article goes on to praise Western civilization:

> America has been in the throes of a debate over values for some time now. Many people, particularly on college campuses, have been reluctant to champion American values. In fact, the study of Western civilization has been deemphasized at many of the nation’s best schools in favor of multiculturalism. It’s one thing to understand and respect other cultures. But the battle for Afghanistan changes the nature of the debate. Women are either free or not free. Other religions are either respected or not. A clear polarity of values has been revealed on the streets of Kabul. When extremists take over a culture, we do have a clash of civilizations, and the tolerant one, in the end is better than the other. That’s what the lesson of Afghanistan teaches us all. (Nussbaum, 2001: 33)

While this article claims to be on the side of ‘moderates’ and against the ‘extremists’ in Afghanistan, what becomes clear is that, as in the *Newsweek* piece and editorial discussed earlier, the only source of legitimate resistance is the ‘superior’ culture. This logic not only erases the struggles of women in Afghanistan for their own liberation, but it also erases the struggles of women in the West against sexism. By presenting women’s equality as a natural part of ‘Western humanist values’, centuries of women’s political activity for suffrage (gained less than a century ago), for equal pay (still not achieved today), for reproductive rights (presently under attack by Christian fundamentalist terrorists), are evacuated from history. Not only is the subjectivity of Western and Afghan women rendered invisible by this discourse, it also constructs artificial barriers to international solidarity. By consenting to an Orientalist logic that paternalistically seeks to protect women, and that serves primarily as a cover for imperialist aims, progressive individuals and organizations risk distancing themselves from the struggles of ordinary people around the world.

Afghan women after the war

When we look at the condition of women today in Afghanistan, it becomes clear that the US never really had their liberation in mind. While some things have changed since the collapse of the Taliban for women, much remains the same. So, for instance, women may now venture out in certain regions without a male escort, but they still do not enjoy basic human rights. And while 1.5 million Afghan children now attend schools – one-third of them girls – more than 3 million children do not go to schools because no infrastructure exists. Reports reveal that women are still punished according to Islamic laws. Kabul jail had no women prisoners shortly after the fall of the Taliban, but as of April 2002 women were being incarcerated for crimes such as leaving their husbands or having relationships with members of the opposite sex (Ahmed-Ullah, 2002). One year after the US attacked Afghanistan, the war-ravaged country had the second highest maternal mortality rate in the world (Sierra Leone was number one): 1700 out of every 100,000 women died during pregnancy or childbirth. In the US, the maternal mortality rate is 12 out of every 100,000 (Reuters, 2002). In December 2002, Human Rights Watch released a report documenting continued violence against Afghan women, particularly in the Western regions of Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

After Laura Bush's radio address (a major public relations effort, coordinated with a State Department report on Afghan women that was released on Saturday, 17 November, the day before Laura Bush's speech), one AP report claimed that 'The [military] campaign is meant to make restoring women's rights a priority when a new government emerges after the war' (*USA Today*, 2001). However, restoring women's rights has not been a priority of the interim or new Afghan government. Of 34 members of the Afghan Transitional Government, only two were women: Sima Samar (Human Rights) and Sohaila Siddiqi (Public Health) (*Guardian Unlimited*, 2001; 'Transitional Government 2002–4', 2000). No money has been allotted from the US's 2003 budget to rebuilding Afghanistan and a recent report suggests that other countries, following the US's lead, have yet to live up to the US $4 billion they had pledged in aid (National Public Radio, 2003). On the other hand, the US worked swiftly to install former Unocal oil corporation consultants in positions of power, such as the president of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai, in order to negotiate a contract for the construction of the oil pipeline. Additionally, the US now has military bases in a region where it had none before. The real aims of the war secured, Afghan women were once again left to languish.

These realities have not prevented journalists from glorifying the US invasion of Afghanistan. 'What a difference regime change makes,' enthused CNN's Christiane Amanpour (explicitly endorsing the invasion of Iraq) on a segment of *60 Minutes* broadcast over a year after the bombing of Afghanistan commenced. Entitled 'The Women of Afghanistan', the segment proposed to look at 'how women have fared' one year later (CBS, 2002) Not surprisingly, the program dealt mainly with girls' education and women's liberation from the burqa. There was no mention of outbreaks of diseases like polio and measles, of chronic hunger or dreadful poverty. Over the past two years, coverage of Afghanistan in the mainstream media has all but vanished; few stories have covered the in-fighting among various warlords and the shambles that the country is now in.

In retrospect, the coverage of Afghan women that followed from 11 September 2001 can only be understood as a cynical and opportunistic use of women. Few journalists and reporters could have believed that the sudden interest in Afghan women was anything other than a cover for the Bush administration's dreams of empire, particularly given the absence of coverage of issues involving women and violence in the US media in general. Additionally, had journalists had some memory of the 1980s media coverage of the Afghan–Soviet war and the mujahideen, out of which the Taliban emerged, they would have remembered that it was positively glowing. As David Gibbs observes, there was 'near unanimous agreement that the [mujahideen] guerillas were "heroic," "courageous" and above all "freedom fighters"' (2002).

As we have seen, however, references to history were largely absent from the story of Afghanistan. Indeed, the figure of the veiled Afghan woman, who could be set in opposition to the bearded, unsmiling face of the Islamic patriarch, was a perfect pawn in this game of dehistoricization. Unmarked by time or any recognizable economic context, Afghan women's oppression was represented largely in ahistorical religious and cultural terms. And their oppression commenced, as numerous reports suggested, with the rise of the Taliban. For instance, one report stated:

> Since taking Afghanistan's capital Kabul in 1996, the Taliban has prohibited schooling for girls over age 8, shut down the women's university, and forced women to quit their jobs, the report said. The Taliban restricted access to medical care for women and limited the ability of women to move about freely. (*USA Today*, 2001).[7]

While it is true that the Taliban did curtail women's rights, this did not result from some peculiarly Afghan historical inevitability. Rather, what Afghan history reveals is that the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and consequent attacks on women is due, in no small part, to US policy – a history and legacy that the media went to some lengths to obscure.

When US politicians and news media suddenly take notice of women, particularly women in war-torn nations, advocates of women's rights need to be cautious. We need to recall the fact that US media have never been particularly good on domestic women's issues, much less international women's issues, for a host of reasons. Since the early days of television, news producers have avoided topics that might prove 'controversial', a word that was and remains a euphemism for arguments that might indict capitalism as an economic system. Thus, when issues relating to women do make it onto the news agenda, we can expect that these issues will support the status quo by diligently avoiding questions about class or economic issues in general.[8]

Importantly, 'controversy' is bad for advertisers, media owners and politicians – the very elites whose special interests dominate the mass media's agenda. Broadcasting controversial information about a corporation or corporate wrongdoing is bad for business. Offering rationales for war that foreground US economic interests in regions like Afghanistan and Iraq is bad for business; additionally, it exposes the base materialistic interests of the class that benefits from these wars. Afghan women, in contrast, work well, especially when they are not allowed to speak for themselves. US women are also useful pawns in this construction. The 'rescue' of Private Jessica Lynch, one of the crowning moments of the war on Iraq, was a US military fabrication. As Kumar (2004) argues, Lynch's story served as way to galvanize patriotism in the US and to demonize the Iraqi people, despite the fact that it was Iraqi doctors and nurses who saved her life. Rhetorically, it served the US well. As *The Guardian* noted:

> . . . [h]er rescue will go down as one of the most stunning pieces of news management yet conceived. It provides a remarkable insight into the real influence of Hollywood producers on the Pentagon's media managers, and has produced a template from which America hopes to present its future wars. (*The Guardian*, 2003)

Even after the BBC and *The Guardian* exposed the inaccuracies and the willful manipulation of the Lynch story by the military and the media, this did not stop various media conglomerates from trying to outbid each other to secure lucrative book deals and movie contracts. Time will tell which version of the story we will get to see and read. Most likely, it will be the version that does not expose the military's lies – that would be simply too 'controversial'.

At the same time, however, these discourses of protection do provide some traction for critics of the War on Terror, largely because they so obviously ring false in light of the US's overall lack of concern for the condition of women, men, and children throughout the world. Consider, for example, that the US is, as Rosalind Petchesky (2001) has pointed out, one of only two countries (along with Afghanistan) that have failed to ratify the Women's Convention and the only country that hasn't ratified the Children's Convention. Domestically, the far right that President Bush has consistently placated (perhaps most notably in his appointment of John Ashcroft as Attorney General) has offered the most active and militant opposition to feminist politics (not to mention their position on lesbian and gay issues – a position not that far removed from that of Islamic fundamentalists).

As long as women are not permitted to speak for themselves, they provide the perfect grounds for an elaborate ventriloquist act, in which they serve as the passive vehicle for the representation of US interests. In the case of Afghan women, despite calls by the Afghan Women's Mission and RAWA to halt the bombing, both organizations received little or no press in the US. The representations of Afghan women in the days following 11 September 2001, and their cynical usage by US politicians, were solely aimed at supporting the US case for intervention. They were meant to supply the US with the ideological (if not ethical) justification for bombing a country whose infrastructure had been destroyed decades before.

Today, the news media have finally 'discovered' that the Bush administration was lying about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Now that the US war is a *fait accompli* and the occupation of Iraq, which is not going as well as planned, promises to continue for months and even years, the mass media can turn its attention to the factual lapses in the case for war.[9] Amidst this flurry of finger pointing, waffling and dissembling, we should point out an earlier lie and a half-hearted promise made to the women of Afghanistan. We should assert that the rhetoric of women's liberation was a lie as monumental as the claims about WMD. But in a society as deeply sexist as the US, and a media system more engrossed with weapons than with women's issues, we can expect that this lie will go unchallenged.

Notes

1. For a history of Afghanistan see Anwar (1988) and O. Roy (1986).
2. The last description – 'definitely dictator material' – was not typically a pejorative in the eyes of the CIA.
3. See Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (2003) for an alternative take on these narratives – one that restores agency to white women who not infrequently sought refuge from their patriarchal communities among Native American societies. See also Strong (2000) for further analysis of these narratives and Equiano et al. (2000) for historical examples.
4. These figures were compiled through a Lexus-Nexus full-text search on the following terms: 'Afghan women', 'Jenna and Barbara Bush', 'Buddha statues'.
5. See 'About RAWA', URL (consulted 15 July 2003): http://rawa.fancymarketing.net/rawa.html
6. The Bush administration was quick to distance itself from feminist issues domestically. The White House stated that it was not adopting a new feminist agenda, insisting that the Taliban's oppression of women was a 'justice issue', not a women's issue.
7. According to RAWA (an anti-fundamentalist women's organization), the fundamentalists who ruled the country from 1992 to 1996 were as bad as the Taliban:

> Different groups were fighting with each other in different parts of the city. Kabul was bathed in blood and burned to ashes during the Jehadi criminals' rule. Crimes committed by the fundamentalists were not limited to mass murders. They raped young girls and women; tortured ethnic minorities; and pillaged national assets and public property. They crammed and roasted prisoners in steel containers and drove nails into their foreheads.

RAWA argues that the leaders of the Northern Alliance should now be tried as war criminals (RAWA, 1999).

8. This is also true of issues directly linked to economic conflicts. See Kumar (2001) for an analysis of the framing of the UPS strike of 1997 that addresses these and related issues.
9. In the lead-up to war, the media were complicit in spinning for the White House. See D. Roy (2003).

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Abstracts

The people’s detective: true crime in Dutch folklore and popular television

Stijn Reijnders

Peter R. de Vries is a Dutch true crime television programme in the tradition of *America’s Most Wanted*. Critics say it is a threat to the moral order and the paradigm of an over-commercialized, degenerate television culture. This article argues differently: programmes such as *Peter R. de Vries* follow an existing tradition and morality in the history of popular culture. The 19th century saw various forms of entertainment that revolved around true crime. A comparison between these forms and the *Peter R. de Vries* episodes revealed striking similarities. Nevertheless, *Peter R. de Vries* is not a straightforward translation of folklore to television codes. The programme also incorporates features of more recent genres. *Peter R. de Vries* takes up a position in the vacuum between the official system of justice and the popular sense of justice, fulfilling a traditional need using new media.

Keywords: history, justice, morality, offence, popular culture, television entertainment

Social change and the corporate construction of gay markets in the *New York Times*’ advertising business news

Angela T. Ragusa

Analysis of a random sample of *New York Times*’ advertising business news articles reveals change in the perception and pursuit of sexual minorities – gays, lesbians, bisexuals and trans-persons (GLBTs) – as consumers of mainstream products between 1980 and 2000. Critical analysis identified three trends: corporate shunning; corporate curiosity and fear; corporate pursuit. Social representation, cultural norms, stereotypes and visibility were explored for each trend, revealing qualitative and quantitative inequality among social groups. Although all GLBTs experienced increased news coverage, gay men received twice the coverage of lesbians. Advertisers and the *Times* changed from stigmatizing and avoiding homosexuals to promoting stereotypes of gay affluence, creating ‘controversial’ ad campaigns with ‘shock value’, commodifying social identity and establishing a gay market niche. Representations reflect homogenized understandings of sexuality, with bisexuals and trans-persons invisible. Case studies demonstrate the *Times*’ contribution to norms, values and beliefs characterizing GLBTs, supporting

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