

Michael L. Ferguson and Lori Jo Marso ed. *W Stands for Women: How the George W. Bush Presidency Shaped a New Politics of Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007)

(Forthcoming in *New Political Science*, December 2008)

As we approach the last few months of the Bush Presidency, it is useful if not imperative to reexamine the gender politics of the last eight years. *W Stands for Women* offers a very valuable gender analysis of Bush Presidency. As the two editors, Michael L. Ferguson and Lori Jo Marso explain, George W. Bush has been a two term president in a period of crisis and war and his acts have impacted the lives of women and men in the US and around the world. *W stands for Women* is a serious examination of the influence and legacy of the reformulated gender politics of the Bush years and an exploration of effective feminist response to this challenge.

What sets *W stands for Women* apart from other texts offering feminist critiques of Bush policies (*The W Effect: Sexual Politics in the Bush years and Beyond; (En) Gendering the War on Terror; September 11, 2001: Feminist Perspectives*), is its theoretically enriched analysis of the 'gendered dimensions of the Bush's Presidency'. Its most important message laid out clearly is that Bush administration's skillful manipulation of feminist rhetoric not only enabled it to gain broad public support but also to pursue a neo-conservative security and economic agenda. Through a careful examination of Bush administration's policies and ideology, the authors offer us a nuanced gender analysis and critique that underscores the symbiosis of feminist rhetoric, Christian right influenced gender ideology and a conservative security agenda.

The book is divided into four sections: ***Compassionate Patriarchy, Bush's Masculinities, Gendered War Logics at Home and Abroad, and Feminist Responses***. Although several articles overlap in their understanding of the gendered basis of Bush policies, each author offers a distinct analysis drawing on works of many political theorists. As a result, these writings are not only creative gender readings but also theoretically salient analyses.

Extracting major findings from different chapters with their diverse foci is a very challenging task but it would help to delineate the gender analyses of Bush Presidency offered in this text. From this reviewer's point of view, there are four major themes/observations that emerge from the analyses presented in the text.

1. The most significant observation is the argument that Bush's promotion of feminist goals, while simultaneously incorporating traditional patriarchal family norms of masculinist protection and female submission in social programs, is intricately tied to his conservative security agenda ushering in the new 'post September 11 Security State' . This argument is clearly articulated through two readings, **Iris Young's** essay, "The Logic of Masculine Protection: Reflection on the Current Security State", and in **R. Claire Snyder's** "The Allure of Authoritarianism: Bush Administration Ideology and the Reconsolidation of Patriarchy". The two readings offer an overarching theoretical framework which connects with other chapters in the book.

In the period after 9/11 attacks, some Bush officials appeared to be championing feminist goals of promoting women's political and economic rights abroad. Simultaneously, the administration actively promoted a patriarchal gender ideology which reinforced the norms of a traditional heterosexual household with man (as dominant) and woman (as subordinate). To understand the significance of this gender ideology, Young suggests that one needs to look at "issues of war and security" through a gender lens that enables one to see "how a certain logic of gendered meanings and images helps organize the way people interpret events and circumstances...and sometimes provides some rationale for action." (116)

Young derives her thesis through an interesting reading of Hobbes' writings which serve as a legitimation for an authoritarian government in the face of threat and enables her to articulate the 'logic of masculinist protection', through which the state offers protection to citizens in exchange for dependence and obedience.

Young argues that after September 11 attacks, Bush administration "mobilized the language of fear and threat to gain support for constricting liberty and dissent inside the United

States and waging war outside” (117). In effect, a new security regime emerged which behaves as “a kind of protection racket in which a masculinized state extorts obedience from a feminized population in exchange for protection against a purported threat” (6). The citizens no longer seem concerned about “due process, separation of powers, free assembly, holding powerful actors accountable” and accepted surveillance and preventive detention as necessary for ensuring security. (117)

One may wonder, why would citizens in an enlightened democratic society give up their rights so easily? Many feel that the state was acting to protect them; those whose privacy and rights have been taken must be doing something wrong. The “logic of masculinist protection” thus creates a division between citizens: “good” (those who are quiet and obedient) and “bad”, (those who criticize or protest, and may find themselves under surveillance and even detained).

Complementing Young’s understanding of the ‘logic of masculinist protection’, **R. Claire Snyder** shows the strong influence of neo conservatives and the Christian right in promotion of ‘gendered hetero-normative family’ which explicitly prescribes male dominance and female submission (18). During Bush Presidency, we have witnessed the Department of Health and Human Service’s promotion of “Healthy Marriage Initiative” and advocacy of “Federal Marriage Amendment”, prohibiting same-sex marriages. Snyder argues that the promotion of patriarchal family undermines democracy by reinforcing male domination and imposing unequal status for women.

It is important to note that Young does not describe the ‘protective’ masculinity as aggressive or dominating, but rather, it can appear benign and chivalrous (118-9). This distinction highlights an important link between the “good men”, who are vigilant and prepared to defend the safety of the family and ready to sacrifice if needed versus the “bad men”, who are selfish, uncivilized aggressors seeking to enslave others (119).

2. The gendered logic of masculinist protection was manifest in support of arguments to justify war against Afghanistan and later against Iraq.

Young suggests that the new ‘security state’ has two faces: one faces inward to keep those under its protection under its control and the other outward to defend against the

enemies. This was illustrated through the arguments made to justify the war against Afghanistan and later against Iraq. At first, US justified the launching of war against Afghanistan as a defensive response to the September 11 attacks. When this argument was criticized that the state of Afghanistan should not be held accountable for the crimes of Al Qaeda, the justification for war was repackaged as a 'humanitarian intervention' to liberate the people of Afghanistan, especially the women from the oppressive Taliban regime.

Here Young points to the "logic of masculinist protection" subtly invoked to make the case for war: the Afghan women were portrayed as victims and under the rule of "uncivilized bad men" and needed to be liberated. Such arguments are frequently reiterated for justifying intervention, to save "people living outside the West, most likely in Islamic countries, ruled by brutal dictatorships" (133). Similar type of discourse was used to portray the threat from Saddam Hussein and his acquisition of weapons of mass destruction and justify the war against Iraq.

Some American feminist organizations hailed this 'protectionist' agenda, but Young criticizes them for adopting an uncritical and stereotyped stance of viewing "third world women" as "passive and victimized by their unenlightened cultures and political regimes" (136).

In 2001, United States chose to ignore the appeal of Afghan women's organizations (RAWA 2001) and from other Afghan citizens to avoid bombing their country, already devastated by three decades of war. We have also seen that seven years after the bombing of Afghanistan in 2001, Afghan women's situation has not improved significantly. US helped establish a new Afghan government that included many warlords whose earlier record was as oppressive to women as the Taliban regime they replaced.

3. Essential ingredient of the "logic of masculinist protection" is the evocation and performance of rugged and resilient 'normative' masculinity, an enactment which has been a struggle for George W. Bush.

David S. Gutterman and Danielle Regan's "Straight Eye for the Straight Guy" is a tour de force gender analysis of Bush Presidency. To understand their argument about why George W.

Bush struggles with being the “masculine protector”, we need to reiterate the authors’ understanding of masculinity.

“Masculinity is not something one is or possesses; it is always a process of becoming. It is a continuous struggle – never fully won...(it) is an often contradictory amalgam of qualities, characteristics, and behaviors. ... a ceaseless series of performances that are intended for public consumption as a vehicle for proving one’s manhood” (84-5). In all cultures, young men undergo enormous hurdles to attain the standing of “a man”; in America, we see its performance aspects in activities such as sports, or driving a car recklessly or consuming enormous quantities of alcohol. The paradox of masculinity also lies in the desire to attain the status of being “The Man” (synonymous with having “recognizable authority, confident demeanor or the air of accomplishment”), which can only be acquired when given by others (85).

George W. Bush faced a serious challenge in having to present himself as the leader of the nation in a time of war. Prior to his presidency, he did not come into public arena with a distinguished record. Although he came from a very privileged background, Bush portrayed himself as a regular guy. After 9/11 however, he has sought to acquire the mantle of a “traditional war president” and “paragon of American manhood” who would restore order and security to his people (72). In pursuit of this goal, there have been many carefully crafted media images of Bush: as a tough commander in chief promising to catch Osama bin Laden dead or alive; posing as a determined leader at Mt Rushmore with the carved images of earlier Presidents in the background; dressed in an aviator suit, landing a fighter jet on an aircraft carrier in front of a banner claiming “Mission Accomplished” and challenging the Iraqi rebels to “bring it on”; or wearing a cowboy hat conveying the impression of being a macho western man at his ranch in Crawford, Texas. However, such performances appear terribly contrived, hyperbolic and hardly reassuring to the citizens, who remain anxious about future attacks. The realities of continued struggles in Afghanistan as part of the unending War on Terror and the poorly managed war in Iraq where the US forces became entrapped in fighting an insurgency with poor equipment and inadequate training hardly convey the image of a ‘masculine’ protector in charge. There are also other lingering images of a President who remained in a

classroom reading a book to children after being informed of the attacks on World Trade Center and was out of sight for several hours when the citizens badly needed reassurance. There are perhaps other reasons for George W. Bush's troubled masculinity (such as his difficult relationship with his father, former President George H.W. Bush as elaborated in a new book, *The Bush Tragedy* by Jacob Weisberg). Ultimately, the authors remind us that heterosexual masculine identity is fraught with imperfect performance, and George W. Bush's hyperbolic performance of masculinity only reaffirms its elusiveness.

4. Gender (relations of dominance and subordination) should not be tied to essentialist notions of men and women. Such relations can characterize a wide range of situations from coercive environments of single sex prisons to military establishments.

This important and perhaps most fascinating insight becomes clear when one reads **Timothy Kaufman-Osborn's** article, "Gender trouble at Abu Ghraib?", one of the most cogent and thought provoking analyses of the scandal that erupted with the photographs of Iraqi detainees being sexually abused by US soldiers. If Gutterman and Regan presented masculinity as a continual act of performance, then Kaufman-Osborn advances our understanding of gender by disassociating it from male and female bodies.

Gender is constituted through "a complex set of performative practices" (including those abusive acts at the Abu Ghraib and elsewhere) and these "practices en-gender persons in ways that are not readily reducible to... women and men" (145-6). For Kaufman-Osborn, gender is a performance; "men and women are constantly being gendered as they participate in practices mandated by cultural norms of masculinity and femininity, which are contingently tied to male and female bodies". Freed from the rigidity of earlier conceptions, gender connotes fluidity. Judith Butler in **Gender Trouble**, illustrates gender's flexibility: "man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one" (149).

How is this performative notion of gender, disassociated from “anatomical equipment” relevant to analysis of the scandal at Abu Ghraib (149)? The media seemed to have focused on Lynndie England, photographed with an Iraqi prisoner in a dog leash and in another, standing with one hand masquerading as a gun at the genitalia of a naked Iraqi prisoner forced to masturbate while the thumb of the other hand raised to convey triumphant control. These photographs raised shock and disgust from both right wing women and left wing feminists. For the conservatives, it was the proof of how “a feminist culture encourages female barbarians”, and the need to restore the earlier form of army with sex segregated basic training. (144) On the other hand, many feminists were also appalled and began to question their beliefs of innate moral superiority of women (145). The question that bothered many was “how could women do that?”, a question based on viewing gender as an essentialist heterosexual identity.

Kaufman-Osborn notes that the official governmental response through various investigations was to characterize the events as aberrations and acts of a “handful of rogue soldiers” (147). The author criticizes this response as an attempt to “decontextualize” their actions and “occlude the ways in which gender is in fact constitutive of what happened at Abu Ghraib” (147) It was also not simply a case of “sexual abuse”, because what happened at Abu Ghraib were “acts of imperialist and racist violence that mimic sexual exploitation”. He urges us to ask, “*why* so much of the abuse meted out at Abu Ghraib...was clearly trafficked in gendered stereotypes” and “what that might teach us about how gender operates as a complex vector of power within the context of *masculinized militarism*” (148).

Kaufman-Osborn depicts the abuse at Abu Ghraib as emanating from a “logic of emasculation”, where the goal is to “strip the prisoners of their masculine gender identity and turn them into creatures of terrified and often infantilized femininity”. He also finds evidence for recommendations for use of such tactics in the Army Field Manual and other official reports, which encourage practices of “gender coercion” for the purpose of softening up the prisoner for interrogation. These were administered in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba before being applied in Iraq. These practices were not uncommon; the soldiers believed that their actions

were entirely consistent with established military doctrine. Indeed, the ample use of camera to photograph these acts indicates “no concerted effort to hide the evidence” (154).

Gendered impact of these techniques were clear: the subjects were to be emasculated by wiping out characteristics associated with masculinity and replacing them with “qualities stereotypically associated with femininity: obedience, passivity, depression, anxiety and shame” (151). Practices employed to achieve the goal of emasculation included “compelling otherwise naked men to wear women’s underwear, often red and often on their heads having a service woman apply red ink to the face of a prisoner after she had placed her hand in her unbuttoned pants and informed him that she was menstruating; forcing men to remove their clothing and then stand before female service personnel... (148). Misogynistic undercurrent is hard to miss, because the goal was to humiliate the prisoners, i.e. be treated “like a woman” (152).

In the end, Kaufman-Osborn returns to explain Lynndie England’s behavior. In the culture of “masculinized militarism”, England was an eager recruit, who was willing to play her role when asked by her superiors and her lover. At the same time being a woman, who participated in emasculating and feminizing of Iraqi male prisoners, she was also subverting her culture’s gender norms.

To conclude, Kaufman-Osborn notes the irony in the claim of US administration liberating women in Afghanistan and Iraq as a result of its military interventions in view of the misogynistic practices rampant in the masculinized culture and basic training and interrogation practices of US military. However, analysis of Abu Ghraib scandal would be incomplete without also acknowledging, the prevalence of “virulent homophobia” expressed in the abusive sexualized violence against the Iraqi men forced to perform homosexual roles. While it is easy to detect the intersection of “race and gender” in the triumphal demeanor of white women soldiers like Lynndie England over shackled Iraqi male prisoners, but what needs to be made transparent is the “logic of neocolonialism and imperialism - from which these practices derive much of their sense”. (159)

W stands for Women is a fine example of serious gender scholarship. It offers many meaningful insights into the gendered basis of Bush Administration's policies. This review, by focusing on major findings, has not done justice to other contributions in the book, which deal with diverse topics, such as Compassionate Conservatism and the HIV AIDS policies; Masculinities of the Suicide Bombers and the US Soldiers; Feminist alternative to Globalization's impact – Feminization; and Bush's Feminist rhetoric and appropriate Feminist response.

Let me end by recalling a few facts from the Bush wars: we witnessed an attempted enactment of heroic masculinity in the Jessica Lynch rescue mission (when women now constitute 15% of the active military personnel and participate in many dangerous missions); we see young American soldiers listen to gangster rap in their Humvees and tanks as they go on their missions and we hear that US military reported 2688 sexual assault claims by women (60% of them were raped) in 2007, an increasing trend each year. The legacy of these wars has been the resuscitation of a 'militarized masculinity', which will impact not only those on the fighting front but also at home, not to speak of the pressures on the selection of the next president.

References

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