



The Boston Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights

Gendering the War in Iraq

Laura Sjoberg

February 13, 2007

Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy
Tufts University

Laura Sjoberg, Ph.D., is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor at Duke University. Her areas of teaching and research include: international security, gender in international relations, international law, international ethics, international political theory, the Middle East, and quantitative and qualitative methods. Dr. Sjoberg's first book, *Gender, Justice, and the Wars in Iraq* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), presents a feminist reformulation of just war theory and an application of that reformulated theory to the wars in Iraq since the end of the Cold War. Her second book, *Mothers, Monsters, and Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (with Caron Gentry, Zed 2007) evaluates treatments of women's violence in interstate and media discourses. She is currently working on a project on strategy and feminist policy in international relations, tentatively titled: "Realism for Feminists: Strategy and Gender Emancipatory Policies in International Relations."

Laura Sjoberg: In August of 1990, the international political atmosphere was one of upheaval and change. The Cold War had barely ended, the Iran-Iraq war had not officially been settled, and the future of the Soviet Union was uncertain at best. Against this background, a conflict between Iraq and Kuwait added to the international political chaos. Iraq believed neighbouring Kuwait had stolen oil, failed to pay for the defense Iraq provided in the Iran-Iraq war, set oil prices, and treated Iraq with economic injustice. In hopes of redressing these grievances, Iraq invaded Kuwait, starting the First Gulf War. The offensive was unannounced, swift, and

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successful. In less than twenty-four hours, Iraq became the first United Nations (UN) member state to conquer another.

After the invasion, the Iraqi government claimed that the attack was a humanitarian intervention against a Kuwait government that violated its citizens' human rights. The international community, however, gave this claim little credence. The UN answered Iraq's invasion quickly. The Security Council imposed a full import and export embargo on all of the territories controlled by Iraq, including Kuwait. The embargo demanded Iraq's unconditional and immediate withdrawal from Kuwait. It was meant to last only a matter of days.

Months later, the embargo still stood. Iraq refused to leave Kuwait without settling their political grievances. The Soviet Union agreed to mediate negotiations for a conditional withdrawal, but Iraq and some members of the Security Council (UNSC) could not agree on the terms. The negotiations ultimately failed. In January 1991, UN-authorized military Coalition led by the United States forced the Iraqi military out of Kuwait.

After just 43 days of fighting, Iraq surrendered. The Security Council set the terms of a permanent cease-fire. They established a conditional regime of comprehensive economic sanctions. Resolution 687 required that Iraq comply with a number of political, economic, and military demands before sanctions would be lifted. These demands included, *inter alia*, Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait; recognition of Kuwait's borders; observation of a demilitarized zone between Iraq and Kuwait; cessation of the production and use of all chemical, biological, nuclear, and long-range weapons; payment of reparations to the Coalition for war costs; return of prisoners and stolen property to Kuwait; an end to state sponsorship of terrorism; and cessation of governmental repression of Iraq's religious and cultural minorities.

The international community spent the next decade embroiled in legal disputes about which demands had to be met to lift the sanctions and how to determine Iraqi compliance. The United States and the United Kingdom insisted on full compliance while France and Russia argued that the goals of sanctions had been largely achieved and that full compliance with the precise demands of Resolution 687 was impossible.

As the international community debated, Iraq remained under one of the longest and strictest economic sanctions regime in modern history. Over the almost thirteen years that the sanctions regime remained in place, it devastated Iraqi economic and social infrastructure, leading to massive health problems, death, and destruction inside Iraq. Iraq permitted hundreds of UN inspections and engaged in constant negotiations during that time. Yet, on more than a dozen occasions, the US and UK believed that Iraq was in such serious violation of UNSC mandates that military force was necessary to obtain Iraqi compliance and preserve international security. The US and UK dropped more bombs on Iraq during the sanctions regime than were used in the entirety of the Second World War.

The United States expressed fears that the Iraqi government possessed weapons of mass destruction and would use them against its neighbors. They assembled a 'coalition of the willing'

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with countries that shared these views and would be willing to take military action against Iraq. The US argued Iraq's alleged possession of WMD constituted a "threat to international peace and security," invoking language from the UN Charter to justify military intervention against a UN member-state. Though the majority of the UN disagreed with this interpretation of international law, the United States insisted on the justice of its cause.

United States and its allies invaded Iraq and ousted President Saddam Hussein, who had been criticized as a brutal dictator in his twenty-four years as Iraqi leader. This regime-change offensive, officially called "Operation Shock and Awe" or "Operation Iraqi Freedom," has been popularly called the Second Gulf War. During this conflict, the United States captures former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Recent elections have military presence in Iraq. Social unrest and political violence continue to be daily problems in an Iraq struggling to regain stability.

The problem of interpretation

The Gulf Wars will likely be an important part of the story of international history at the turn of the twenty-first century. What is less clear is how they will be remembered. The official tale of the Gulf Wars, as I just related it, includes no women and no gender. What one makes of these wars (even if history calls them wars at all) depends on one's interpretation of political situations and political ethics. In other words, given the same *facts*, political scientists, historians, and other observers will produce with as many different *opinions* about the worth of those facts as there are evaluators. In telling the story of the wars in Iraq since the end of the Cold War, realists see a (sometimes misguided) struggle for relative power, liberals see international security driven more by economics than ever before, and constructivists see conflict over the content and enforcement of international norms. These three interpretations contribute to a comprehensive account of the situation in Iraq, but even together, are inadequate to fully explain it.

The search for feminist knowledge can be seen as a journey to understand and change the world through "gendered lenses." In feminist research, I am looking to understand international politics, to find its injustices, and to challenge those injustices, while recognizing a pluralism concerning the definition and appraisal of injustice. As Ann Tickner points out, this makes feminist method not an event, but a journey – a journey that I take through observation, critique, revealing, reformulation, reflexivity, and action, guided by gendered lenses.

We will start with individual gender. Feminists in IR frequently go out of their way to *look for women* in global politics. Women are necessarily a part of global politics: they make up more than half the world's population and are located everywhere that men are. Yet, the stories of global politics often do not mention the women whose lives affect and are affected by international relations.

The histories of Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, and Israel are contentious. Political convictions influence the stories that people tell of Middle East relations since the end of the First World War. Some speak of Israel's fight to survive in a region that threatens to replicate the Holocaust. Others recount the

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oppression of the Arab Middle East by rich and powerful outsiders, in Israel and abroad. These stories from diverse political perspectives perhaps share nothing but their tendency to omit women.

Women are largely omitted from the histories of the First Gulf War. Where women are mentioned, it is normally in the context of either their need for protection or a human interest story on the oddity of women in participatory roles. The stories of women that were told in the First Gulf War (when they were told at all) were of innocent women in need of protection or feminine emulation of masculine military values.

Telling the stories that remain untold in traditional histories is one of feminisms' strongest tools. Feminisms look to politics at the margins to find women - to see realities about their lives, their actions, and their suffering. Speaking about women's lives makes it more difficult to ignore them.

Still, women's lives were 'spoken' constantly during the Second Gulf War. Indeed, women were the stars of the war. Jessica Lynch became America's sweetheart. Sabrina Harman became a porn star. Everyone wondered what Janis Karpinski knew. Condoleeza Rice was the center of media fascination. Mothers at war sang 'Happy Birthday' to their children at home on nationally televised satellite phone calls. The President talked about fighting the war for Iraqi women's rights. Jean Elshstain's high profile editorials helped 'erase' the gender gap about war. If it was *stories about women* that feminists wanted, the Second Gulf War delivered in unprecedented quantity.

Reading those stories show that women became more visible in the Second Gulf War, but that this visibility did not signify the completion of the project of women's emancipation. Women's lives were used to justify war-making and war-fighting. Stereotypes about women served to second-guess female leaders' abilities. The "stars" of the Second Gulf War were portrayed as one-dimensional; they were women in a world of masculinity rather than women in a world of people.

Gendered lenses *identify* the women in the Gulf wars. They evaluate the roles that women are cast in and question the validity of gendered categories. They employ empathy to understand diverse women's lives. In the stories of the women in the Gulf Wars, they find a world where *genderings* have become more complicated and more subtle, but still permeate international politics.

The First Gulf War was a time when women were discovering new roles in war – American women as soldiers, Iraqi women as subjects of international political debate – but it was also a time when the descriptions and realities of those roles kept alive the just war image of female 'beautiful souls' needing protection. On the American/Coalition side of the war, Western, Iraqi, and Kuwaiti women served as emblematic signifiers of the justice of the cause against Iraq. Cynthia Enloe explains that, "if there is an image that defines television's Gulf Crisis, it's a dishevelled white woman coming off a Boeing 747, an exhausted baby on her shoulder." This

image of a woman was a key psychological justification for engaging in both wars against Iraq. One of the things that states (and the just warriors in their military) are supposed to do is protect *their* women. States claim exist to protect ‘womenandchildren.’

Cynthia Enloe uses ‘womenandchildren’ as one word to connote women being seen as helpless, and in a group without agency, or like children. Also ‘womenandchildren’ are often grouped as the innocent and helpless in times of war – for example, someone accusing a belligerent of being unjust *in bello* may accuse them of bombing womenandchildren residing in opponents’ cities. These women’s insecurity served as a call to war. They reminded governments ‘back home’ of what the world would be like if women were not fought for and protected. A man with honor could do nothing other than fight for the tired woman; leaving her to suffer would abrogate his masculinity. Western women’s physical safety in the conflict area called Western men to arms during the First Gulf War.

Another symbolic employment of gender to motivate war-fighting came from images of American women living in the American dream. To the United States, the First Gulf War was where [in part] about preserving Western women’s way of life. President Bush and a number of other Western leaders talked about free access to Iraqi and Kuwait oil as a question of defense of the way of life that citizens had become accustomed to. Discussion of oil as key to mothers’ driving their children to soccer practice, or heating their homes, or performing other household functions reliant on access to oil dominated the part of the Gulf War justification rhetoric which talked about Western interests. Lack of access to oil would hinder women from effectively serving as mothers and wives, and this was a part of the justification for going to war. A common image for the ‘way of life’ argument justifying United States involvement in the Gulf War was that of a woman unloading her children out of a car in front of a house with a yellow ribbon. She feeds her children, waters her flowers, and conveys the message that her husband is in Iraq, fighting so that they can keep this way of life.

Here, a woman’s role as a mother is highlighted. Motherhood in war serves a number of functions: physical creation of soldiers, social creation of these soldiers, support of the soldiers from back home, a woman for each soldier to protect, and a comfort for who soldiers are wounded in battle. In the Gulf War, in turn, soldiers were cast as fighting for their ‘wives and mothers’. They defended ‘freedom for their children’ and a ‘new world order’ where ‘all fathers, mothers and children’ would be able to live without fear for their lives. The pageantry of the war included videotaped messages from soldiers in Iraq ‘back home,’ saying hello to their mothers, and to the mothers of their children. This created the double image that mothers were being fought for, and that the soldiers fighting were tough, but focused on what they were protecting, Beautiful Souls at home.

Beautiful Souls at home were not the only protective purpose of the Western soldiers who spent 1991 in Iraq. One of the arguments made for the defense of Kuwait was the protection of Kuwaiti women and children from the horrors inflicted by Iraqi soldiers. Much abuse of Kuwaiti ‘womenandchildren’ is documented during the Iraqi occupation. At the time it was argued that the abuse of women in Kuwait by the Iraqi military was a part of the reason why Kuwait must be

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liberated from Iraqi control. Many Americans advocated continuing the Gulf War to overthrow the government of Iraq because of Saddam Hussein's abuse of women. Saddam Hussein was accused of sponsoring rape, severe psychological trauma, politicized sexual violence, and torture of mothers for their children's political activities. The Saddam Hussein government's abuse of women played an important part in the argument that it was an illegitimate government; legitimate governments would not abuse women, who are by gender defenseless.

This discourse fails to mention the (often horrible) effects of war on women. The claim, instead, is that the violation of women is an international security issue. Women must be fought *for*; that the fighting might hurt them does not enter political conversation.

In this situation, American men and women must protect Iraqi women from Iraqi men (specifically, from an Iraqi man, Saddam Hussein) by force, lest the security of the international community break down. The women who are being protected are omitted on a number of levels: their agency, their preferences, their choices, and their ultimate fate. Also, women who fight are generally neglected.

Though the expected role for women as 'beautiful souls' remained alive and well in the Gulf War, new, more active roles for women evolved as well. These roles cast women as political and military participants, both in Iraq and the United States. However, while these stories about women departed from previously accepted roles in important ways, they nonetheless reflected continued gender subordination.

The Ba'ath party government of Iraq saw an important political role for women in the establishment, security and preservation of the Iraqi state. Beginning in the 1980's, the Iraqi government sponsored a group called the Iraqi Women's Federation, with the mission of improving the political and social situations of Iraqi women. Saddam Hussein encouraged Iraq's Women's Federation to put women into non-traditional jobs and to develop rationing programs to ensure that their families were cared for. Iraq's liberal gender policies were intended both for the purpose of promoting gender equality and for the purpose of changing the political composition of Iraq, with the ultimate goal to get Saddam Hussein a multiethnic coalition of supporters.

The Women's Federation had the dual function of promoting women's rights and earning women's loyalty across ethnic lines. Ethnic factionalism was a constant threat to divide Iraq. Though the majority of Iraqis are Muslim, one quarter are non-Arab. Within the Arab majority, political tensions between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims have always been high. In a state fiercely divided on religious and ethnic lines, Saddam Hussein looked for support from interest groups, including women. The Iraqi government tried to win women's loyalties by providing them organizational alternatives and by extending rights and services to them. Social programs bettered women's lives at least in part so that the Iraqi government could manipulate women for political purposes. It is these women, who 'walk a tightrope' politically anyway, who have the most to lose when an international crisis polarizes internal debate. The social policies that were

so crucial to these women's quality of life were the first to go when sanctions handicapped the Iraqi government's spending.

Like Iraqi women, American women were characterized as key political participants during the Gulf Wars. As with most wars, the Gulf War was less popular with women than with men in the United States. This 'gender gap' decreased after the war started; women were less likely to speak out against a war where the lives of those they knew, cared about, or were related to were directly at stake. The 'gender gap' widened again as people were asked to look at the war in retrospect.

In the First Gulf War, overall, American women were less likely to support the use of force than were men – a result that is statistically significant, if substantively modest. This gender gap has been explained as inherent to women's biology, tied to women's experiences as women. The gender gap, however, was not just fact but politics. The United States government considered the gender gap malleable, and the government coordinated successful media efforts to get women on board with the war. The government rallied for women's support of the war and for service in the war effort.

The story of a woman as a political actor portrays her as more dynamic than, and as having more choices than, the passive beautiful soul. Still, in the case of the United States, women's political activity was limited to support (or lack thereof) of the government's decision to go to war – women were not expected to be the decision-makers in choosing whether or not to go to war – nor, for the most part, the soldiers who fought the war. In Iraq, women's newfound importance was produced for the purpose of favorably altering political dynamics within the country; women were political participants, and were also manipulated political subjects. These expected passivities dovetail with the former expectation that women should be passively protected by war, innocent of it but supportive of and grateful for the fighting.

Still, the passive political participant image of a woman in the Gulf War was not the only new model of participation. A gender-role expectation of women-as-soldiers was introduced in Iraq, in Kuwait, and in the United States in the First Gulf War. Still, a female soldier was not just a soldier (this soldier is a man, this soldier is a woman) but a special kind of soldier – a *woman* soldier. In Iraq, the Women's Foundation had placed women in military service. Some women had combat roles in the Iraqi National Guard. Their sex-segregated battalions were touted by the Iraqi government. One of the more stark images of the Gulf War is that of a female battle group marching parade in Baghdad, dressed in traditional Islamic women's attire, carrying automatic weapons. Women soldiers also served in Kuwait, where one in nine women were a part of a combatant fighting force to repel Iraq's invasion.

The United States deployed a non-trivial number of women to war. In the past, women in the United States military had been limited to off-field nurses and a few support personnel, accounting for less than one percent of the deployed force. The number of female troops grew from less than one percent in the Vietnam War to seven percent in the First Gulf War. While

these women were still formally barred from combat participation, they served combatant functions like flying spy helicopters and riding in battle tanks.

These semi-combat roles were fetishized in American popular culture. Soon after the Gulf War, the movie *Courage Under Fire* dealt with questions concerning appropriate standard of conduct for women in technically non-combatant roles who are forced into situations that require combatant behaviour. It explores the stereotypical passive woman, and contrasts that with women's potential for extraordinary bravery in combat. It depicts the main character (a female soldier) as a new type of soldier: tough as the men, but maternal to them at the same time.

There is no gender-disaggregated death toll for the women soldiers of Iraq, Kuwait, or other Coalition forces. From the United States, fifteen women were killed, five by enemy fire; two were taken prisoner. The Gulf War called attention to women's presence in the military and to the new image of woman-as-soldier, which was being introduced in the United States. The female fighters for allies and enemies went largely unnoticed in United States media, but American women soldiers were extremely popular. Media images of women soldiers proliferated throughout the Gulf War, partly in an attempt to close the gender gap and partly to provoke questions about women's changing roles.

In other words, the seven percent of the United States forces who were female did not operate in a military that had suddenly abandoned centuries of militarized masculinity to accept their presence. Instead, these women were 'allowed to participate' in military force still dominated by masculinities. The language of sport and sexual domination of the enemy continued, along with the practice of sexualizing warriors. Pornographic movies were still shown prior to the execution of missions, and challenges to masculinity were still issued to inspire soldiers. Women soldiers were expected to display the same traits that male warriors had exhibited throughout the long and proud tradition of American war-fighting. Still, they could not escape their womanhood in a sexual military. Twenty-five American women were sexually assaulted by their fellow soldiers in the First Gulf War.

While many women were nameless, faceless gender constructs who were either manipulated or ignored in the Gulf Wars, several women in the second Gulf War became public stories; examples of what women should or should not be. For example, the story of Private Jessica Lynch was all over every news source in the United States through the first weeks of May 2003. Lynch was the first American prisoner of war to be taken by the Iraqi military. At the young age of 19, she ostensibly went down fighting, was injured in battle, and tortured in captivity. The military's story is of a daring rescue, where a battle was created for diversion and gunfire erupted in a hospital. Lynch was "just a country girl" that became a "hero" and a household name.

Lynch was characterized at once as brave beyond her femininity (shooting at Iraqi soldiers) but limited by it (in need of a massive rescue operation that would likely to have been put together for a male POW). She became a symbol of the new roles that war had for women. I argue that the *forefronting* of Jessica Lynch's story, however, was not gender liberation but gender marginalization with different means. Certainly the portrayal of Lynch in the media was far from

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Elshtain's understanding of women's role of Beautiful Souls. After all, Beautiful Souls are passive in the choice to go to war, fought *for* instead of fighting, and helpless in the face of actual warfare. Lynch was different. Jessica Lynch was a *soldier* and a fighter. She went down fighting, was brave through interrogation, and endured torture and rape.

Still, a number of similarities between the portrayal of Jessica Lynch and the traditional just war understanding of Beautiful Souls emerge. Jessica Lynch's having gone down fighting was seen as remarkable; most soldiers would be expected to continue fighting until either captured or killed. *That a girl fought* was seen as anomalous in accounts of Lynch's capture. Lynch, like many reservists, was said to have joined the army to see the world. Her choice, then, was not to fight, or to go to war, but to be a tourist. Jessica Lynch was not portrayed as having a choice to go to war (either personally or in national politics). Instead, she was a *girl* who wanted some adventure and just happened to end up in an army supply tank with a gun in the desert in Iraq. Lynch was also *fought for* instead of fighting in most of the story about her rescue – she was helpless, a captive in an Iraqi hospital. The soldiers needed to go *save her*. In fact, her rescue was so intricate that it required *faking* a battle in order to complete. The most publicized rescue mission in military history followed. Of course, Lynch had to be saved – *war is about protecting innocent women*. She needed to be saved not just because she could be tortured, but because her being a *woman* meant that she was vulnerable to sexual violence. Iraqis could not get away with inflicting sexual violence on American *women*. Jessica Lynch was at once presented as a glorified war hero and an innocent woman – a Beautiful Soul who could not escape the mould, even with a gun and a uniform.

As if this story about Lynch were not gendered *enough*, it turns out most of the story was a contrivance, presented by the United States military to obtain the image of Lynch that they desired. As John Kampfner documents, the coverage of the Jessica Lynch story was a feat of news management by the Pentagon. In fact, Lynch had not gone down fighting – her gun had malfunctioned. She had not been shot at; she was injured by an automobile accident. She surrendered to Iraqi troops and begged for her life. Iraqi troops took her to a hospital, where her injuries were treated, and she was assigned one of only two nurses in the hospital. The Iraqi military abandoned the hospital that Lynch was being kept in, and left her there with the medical staff. She has no memory and no evidence of rape; instead, a nurse sung to her and talked about her boyfriend. The medical staff at the hospital attempted a daring rescue of their own, putting Lynch into an ambulance and sending it to the United States checkpoint. The United States, unaware of the ambulance's contents, fired on it. The next day, United States troops entered an unguarded hospital and recovered Lynch. The rescue was filmed; although no violence is ever shown, it is implied in the edited tape. Shoshana Johnson, however, was captured and tortured.

Lynch herself objects to this portrayal of her rescue. She denies bravery in the face of capture, characterizing herself as just another soldier, and then just another prisoner of war. She also denies being tortured, remembering that she was treated well by her Iraqi captors.

If Jessica Lynch is the story of women's innocence, Sabrina Harman, Lyndie England and Megan Ambuhl, were the story of what letting 'bad' women in does to your military. They are women who committed war crimes; *these women* are the enemy from whom the (male) prisoners need protection. Whenever their stories are presented in mainstream media, it is as a way to *explain away* the possibility that women can do what these women did. In these accounts they are described as manipulated, obsessed or insane.

Women soldiers aren't the only publicly gendered images around the wars in Iraq; leaders are also portrayed in very gendered terms. Condoleeza Rice has gained the nickname 'the warrior princess' around her office and in international politics more broadly. Internally, the nickname seems to be a fond joke about her military prowess. Internationally, this diminution is part of a trend of nicknaming members of the Bush Administration after cartoon characters seen to parody them. President George W. Bush has been called 'Captain America' or 'Rambo,' Dick Cheney has been referred to as 'the Terminator,' and Rice has been named after a popular television character, Xena the Warrior Princess.

Sexually demeaning terms for Saddam Hussein permeated international political discourse about Iraq leading up to both Gulf Wars. Most notably, Thomas Friedman, a respected journalist, wrote an editorial discussing 'Sodom' Hussein's violations of international agreements. The term 'Sodom' connotes a relationship between Saddam Hussein and those who, in Old Testament lore, God punished for homosexual hedonism. Exactly what about Saddam Hussein, I would like to ask Friedman reminds him of anal penetration? Or is it simply sensationalist rhetoric? Certainly, we use analogies to try to understand the complex world of international politics. Here, the analogy that Friedman uses is anything but benign. His heterosexist rhetoric implies that – like Saddam Hussein – gays are evil. Like gays, Saddam Hussein needs to be punished. Saddam, in this analogy, is a sinner; and the worst kind, a sexual sinner. In the use of this label, Friedman seems to be repaying Saddam Hussein with the evil that he feels the Iraqi President is responsible for; but it is the Iraqi people who suffer the most in this show of phallic force.

The analogy of sexual intercourse to the situation in Iraq is used all too frequently in global political descriptions of the Gulf Wars. In discussing the possibility of overthrowing the Saddam Hussein regime, the US discussed its frustration that it had 'penetrated' Saddam Hussein's 'inner sanctum' without obtaining satisfactory results. Was the sex really that bad? In attacking Iraq, the United States used GBU-24's, which are smart penetrating bombs characterized by one military guru as operable by remote control "with precision so great we could have hit a vagina." Was a vibrator not good enough? Accusations that the United States had exaggerated its reports about weapons in Iraq were phrased in sexual terms as well. The United States 'sexed up' its claims; to 'sex up' means to make more tantalizing or exciting. Is war and death really about sexual excitement? In response to Iraq's perceived participation in terrorism, country singer Toby Keith wrote a song that was a top-selling single in the US in 2002. It threatened to "put a boot up your ass, it's the American way." Will sexual violence solve our problems? A former member of a UN inspection team has made a living telling sordid (and obviously false) sex stories about Iraqi punishments for weapons inspectors. Was the reality just not as good as the fantasy? A popular adult cartoon, "South Park," portrays Saddam Hussein as the 'bottom' in a

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homosexual relationship with Satan. Do we need to subjugate him that badly? Proposals to end the wars have been characterized as pulling out and early withdrawal. The United States could not end the war – performance anxiety meant they had to last until the end. Are we really that insecure?

Carol Cohn discusses the frequent use of sexualized images in war-making. ‘Deep penetrating’ missiles sexualize weaponry. The language of missile construction and invention is a language of male birth and creation. This sexualized aggressive masculinity, Cohn explains, is paired with a discourse of femininity that makes war seem humane and masterable, despite sexualized aggression. The ‘feminine’ counterpart to *war sex* discourse is a discourse of *war cleanliness* that ‘cleans up’ sexualized violence and pretends that the abuse did not happen.

The first Gulf War has a hero, a bad guy and a woman to be rescued. The hero goes to amazing lengths to defeat the bad guy and rescue the woman. The bad guy dies, the woman is safe, and everyone lives happily ever after.

The Second Gulf War has a similar narrative. The United States went to amazing lengths to defeat Saddam Hussein and protect the world from his alleged weapons of mass destruction. Saddam was captured, the world was safe...

These discourses appear gender-neutral on face, but examination shows them to be not only gendered, but *sexual*. In the Gulf, gendered states fought sexualized wars. In the First Gulf War, the Coalition’s story was one of *just warrior states* defending *beautiful soul states*. The story is gendered and its subtext is sexual, as the Coalition frequently described its battle plans and battle victories in sexual language. This sexualisation detracted from the suffering that the Coalition caused, in what some identify as the most unbalanced use of military force in history. This sexualisation of the Gulf Wars carried over in the Second Gulf War, where gendered abuse of prisoners earned seven American soldiers international notoriety.

Gendered lenses question gendered and sexual stories of war, both for their explicitly gendered content and for their relationships with empathetic cooperation and care, the motivating moralities for feminist just war theories. Stories like the ones surrounding the Gulf Wars provide examples of the injustices that feminist just war theories were created to interrogate, critique, and reformulate.

This talk means to locate women and gendered images at the individual and state levels in the Gulf Wars, particularly the most recent one. It reminds us that militarism and military culture, as well as war, rely on women, femininity and images of them, even when they claim and pretend to ignore their existence. The war in Iraq is no exception. Gender is the lynchpin at every turn: to excuse its continuation, to excuse its flaws, to obscure its mismanagement, and to sensationalize its fighting.