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Domestic Containment or Equal Standing? Gender, Nationalism, and the War on Terror

"The true symbols of the War on Terror are the Islamic veil and the two-piece woman's business suit."
—*USA Today*, 26 September 2005

This article is inspired by the work of Jane De Hart, who has written incisively on the history of women's rights, and on the impact of international engagement on gender roles and American national identity. Historically in the United States, military engagement has deeply influenced the development of American citizenship and social policy. War and military engagement also affect the development of governing institutions in ways that have long-term implications for political incorporation of various social groups. In periods of war, American political leaders have been particularly attentive to the way that gender roles and ideals represent the nation, as they sought to differentiate the United States from its international enemies—such as the Nazis in World War II, the Communists during the Cold War, and Islamic Radicals in the War on Terror today.[1] In justifying the current war, the Bush administration employed a rhetoric of women's emancipation in Afghanistan and Iraq that set out a vision of what rights matter most for women, and implicitly invoked a comparison to U.S. gender politics. A similar comparison was made after World War II, in comparing American gender relations to the totalitarian demands imposed upon women by the Nazi regime in Germany and the Communist regime in the Soviet Union. In this article, I will explore the parallels in the framing of gender and nationalism during the Cold War and in the War on Terror today.

THE COLD WAR AND ITS LEGACY

During the Cold War (1950s–1980s), the nation's status in the world relative to the Communist bloc influenced the way that gender roles and rights were regarded in the United States. As Elaine Tyler May (1988) wrote in *Homeward Bound*, just as the United States sought to contain communism internationally, the nation also sought to contain social forces that seemed to threaten domestic life at home. The turn to containment grew out of the traumas of the 1930s and 1940s: "Cold war ideology and the domestic revival [were] two sides of the same coin: postwar Americans' intense need to feel liberated from the past and secure in the future" (10). Jane De Hart (2001, 1999) has explored May's theme of domestic containment more fully in several essays that explore gender relations and national identity during the Cold War. De Hart (2001) notes that in times of national crisis "formative configurations of gender, sexuality and nationhood" are "often reasserted, sometimes coercively, in constructions of national identity" (143). Domestic containment operated in the 1950s at a time when "fear of communism permeated American life" and policymakers believed that "stable family life [was] necessary for personal and national security as well as supremacy over the Soviet Union" (125).

The turn toward domestic containment came after a moment in which some Americans were advancing a more egalitarian vision of gender relations in the United States. The 1940s was a period in which there was a more clearly articulated standard of universalism that was represented in a commitment to common rights for all persons. World War II had made apparent the costs of using status demarcations (such as race, religion, or ethnicity) to create a segregated or stratified legal and political order. Following the war, previously marginalized ethnic and minority groups articulated new rights claims,[2] and were eligible for new social benefits under the GI Bill. It even appeared for a time as if women would be able to make new rights and equality claims based upon their war service and support (Ritter 2006, chap. 6). Yet, in the process of securing social provisioning for veterans, the nation reordered the terms of social citizenship such that there was a new hierarchy of civic standing that was gendered. Under this new hierarchy, the civic virtue of the male veteran was recognized as superior to all others. The female dependents of veterans were awarded civic recognition as well—indirectly, through their association with male veterans. In the aftermath of World War II, American social citizenship and rights did expand, but not entirely in an equalizing direction.

One example of the interplay between international affairs and domestic gender politics in American political development involves the simultaneous

1940s debates over equal rights for women in the United States and human rights for all internationally. In 1945, the full Senate debated and narrowly defeated an Equal Rights Amendment that would have made sex discrimination unconstitutional. Women's contributions to the war effort had galvanized support for the amendment. Rights activists drew international comparisons in support of their vision of gender rights in the United States. In testimony before the Senate, the National Advisory Council of the National Women's Party recalled the experience of women in Germany. "The 'Kinder, Kuche, Kirche' idea of women, coined in Germany long before the advent of Hitler or even Kaiser Wilhelm, has prevented a woman's movement [from] ever rising in that most unfortunate country. This fact has, to our mind, largely contributed to Germany's extreme militarism, and the disaster which engulfs that nation today" (*Amend the Constitution*, 1945, 26). Similarly, as the hot war ended and the cold war was set to begin, attorney George Gordon Battle suggested that the nation was faced with an important historical moment.

> And there never was a time when it was more necessary for this nation to show its absolute faith in democracy. The totalitarian governments have revived the old restrictions against women and have added many new prohibitions. . . Certainly now is the time for the leading democracy of the world to testify to its faith in the doctrine of absolute equality so far as the rights of its citizens are concerned. (*Amend the Constitution*, 1945, 38)

True democracy and equal rights should be pursued not only in the interests of women, but in the interests of the nation as a whole.

While the effort to secure the Equal Rights Amendment at the end of World War II did not succeed—the amendment failed to gain the two-thirds support needed in both houses of Congress before being submitted to the states—other rights campaigns were more successful. The historical roots of the 1960s rights revolution lay in the American response to World War II and the Cold War, and the desire to highlight the nation's commitment to individual worth in response to Nazi and Soviet attacks on American racial segregation (Skrentny 2002, Dudziak 2000). Mary Dudziak (2000) has written about the impact that international criticism of racial segregation had on federal support for civil rights enforcement in the 1950s and 1960s. But in the area of women's rights, the response to international criticism was different. When the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) brought forth its recommendations for international approval in 1951, Eleanor Roosevelt spoke in support of *formal* rights for women. Roosevelt was particularly concerned with women's

political representation. As she argued before the assembled delegates, "Too often the great decisions are originated and given form in bodies made up wholly of men, or so completely dominated by them that whatever special value women have to offer is shunted aside without expression" (Roosevelt 1995, 615). Yet because of their domestic duties, Roosevelt never expected true equality between men and women ("for most women are needed in their homes while their children are small" [615]), but she believed that far greater effort needed to be made to include women in the political process. Even among the supporters of women's formal rights, such as Eleanor Roosevelt, there were expressions of pride in the nation's embrace of traditional gender roles.

Although the Cold War ideologies of containment faded in the 1960s and 1970s—with the rise of feminism, civil rights, and the public's reaction to our failure to contain communism in Vietnam—they did not disappear forever. Anticommunism and support for traditional gender roles experienced a resurgence in the 1980s during the Reagan-Bush years. Domestically, this period was marked by a renewed division between equal rights advocates and the supporters of traditional family roles. That division ultimately led to the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment in the early 1980s (Mathews and De Hart 1990, Mansbridge 1986). Internationally, once the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union fell, the United States was without a clear international enemy against whom to define ourselves. Writing in 2001 on the eve of the War on Terror, De Hart presciently observes that "in the post–Cold War era efforts to define the nation are surfacing yet again. . . . Without an outside enemy against whom to define ourselves, conflicting groups within the nation-state seek to redefine 'the people' versus 'the other'" (145).

THE WAR ON TERROR

Given the controversy that surrounded the 2000 presidential election, which was eventually decided by the U.S. Supreme Court, many Americans appeared doubtful about the legitimacy of Bush's claim to office. All of that seemed to change in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001. As he led the nation in rebuilding and addressing the ongoing threats to national security, President Bush seemed to have found his place. A confident, determined president addressed the nation shortly after the attacks occurred. In his speech, Bush explained the nature of our new enemy, the terrorists:

> They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each

other. . . .These terrorists kill not merely to end lives, but to disrupt and end a way of life. . . .This is not, however, just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom. (Bush, 20 September 2001)

This was indeed a clash of civilizations (Huntington 1996), or, in President Bush's frame of reference, it was a clash between those who favored civilization and those who opposed it.

Where did women fit in this clash? The war in Afghanistan was labeled by the federal government as "Operation Enduring Freedom." The freedom being brought to Afghanistan was cast in gendered terms. President Bush's portrayal of the Taliban "nightmare" that existed in Afghanistan before the United States came to liberate the country focused heavily on the fate of women: "Afghanistan was a totalitarian nightmare, a land where women were imprisoned in their homes" and "Women were publicly whipped" (5 September 2006). Sliding easily from the Taliban to Islamic terrorists more generally, Vice President Cheney contends that "terrorists" are "at war with practically every liberal ideal." Theirs is an ideology that "would condemn women to servitude" (February 2007). According to a 2005 State Department fact sheet, "Islamic Radicals" envision a future of oppression, which includes "banning dissent and books, brutalizing women, and controlling every aspect of life." The war against the Taliban, like the larger War on Terror, was justified partly by that regime's oppressive gender practices, including the demand that women be submissive to men, the denial of education to women, women's exclusion from governance, and the expectation that women should wear burkhas in public.

The treatment of women defines what is different between the United States and our enemies (often seen by the public as simply "Islamic Radicals") in the War on Terror. Explaining the way that gender and kinship structure the differences between the Judeo-Christian West and the Islamic Middle East, Stanley Kurtz (2007) wrote in the *New Republic* about the importance of parallel cousin marriage to Islamic society. Because Muslims refuse to "form alliances with strangers by 'marrying out,'" Islamic societies remain antimodern. The key to the war on terror, according to Kurtz, can be found in Islam's treatment of women. "We've all heard about full-body veiling, the seclusion of women, forced marriage, honor killing, and the like." According to Kurtz, the tradition of parallel cousin marriage "acts as a social 'sealing mechanism' to block cultural interchange" and "has everything to do with why Muslim

societies have difficulty accommodating modernity, why Muslin immigrants resist assimilation, and why some Muslims are attacking us." In this view, the treatment of women matters for what it tells us about how male authority is structured. The difference between the civilized West and its opponents in the War on Terror is to be found in gender roles and religious structures.

By valuing the place of women and talking about religious pluralism, the Bush administration helps to invoke both tolerance and social order. As Laura Bush suggested in her 2001 radio address, "We may come from different backgrounds and faiths—but parents the world over love our children. We respect our mothers, our sisters and daughters." This new ideology of domestic containment is similar to the one articulated by figures like Eleanor Roosevelt at the beginning of the Cold War, when she voiced support for women's educational and political rights while asserting that in the United States it was "the family which is the center for men and women alike, and for their children, and we try to make it possible for the father of the family to earn enough so that the woman can stay home and care for the children if she wishes" (Roosevelt 1995, 618). In its current guise, this narrow vision of gender and religious pluralism allowed women to manage dual roles as public citizens and private caretakers and congregants—roles that helped to ensure that society would not be structured along the lines of a self-sealed paternal patriarchy, as occurs (in this clash-of-civilizations vision) under Islam.

Has the War on Terror produced its own version of domestic containment, comparable to the enforcement of traditional gender roles during the Cold War? "The answer," as Jane De Hart (2001) has written regarding the Cold War, "requires viewing domestic containment in the larger context of constructions of American national identity" (128). While the trends are not yet clear, there is suggestive evidence that a new version of domestic containment may be present. When President Bush ran for reelection in 2004, he stressed his credentials as a strong leader who was defending the nation in the war on terror, and he portrayed himself as a cultural conservative who would defend the nation from assaults on traditional values. In the wake of state and federal court decisions in 2003 that seemed to create an opening for the legalization of gay marriage, President Bush remarked, "If we are to prevent the meaning of marriage from being changed forever, our nation must enact a constitutional amendment to protect marriage in America" (Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo 2005, 483). Not only did gay marriage threaten marriage per se, but it threatened its meaning for American national identity, which is why a constitutional amendment was needed to confirm the nation's commitment to traditional marriage, "between a man and a woman" (ibid., 474).

While President Bush has not drawn connections between the War on Terror and his defense of traditional gender roles, conservative evangelical leader Jerry Falwell did, when he said after the 9–11 attacks, "I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, . . . all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen'" (CNN.com 2001).

Iris Marion Young (2003) observed that there is a "logic of masculinist protection" connected to the War on Terror, which expresses a patriarchal political ideology in which the nation's political leaders "use a language of fear and threat to gain support for constricting liberty and dissent inside the United States" (3) while subordinating those in need of protection, especially women and children.

Yet as the war drags on, and President Bush's popularity ratings plunge, we may be seeing the limit of public support for the War on Terror. Women, in particular, may be finding the masculinist logic of protection less appealing than they did just a few years ago (Feldman 2004, Haieder-Markel and Vieux 2008). It is too soon to tell whether the domestic containment ideology associated with the War on Terror will have a lasting presence in American political culture. But as the United States searches to define its place in the post–Cold War international order, it seems that many Americans are also thinking about how gender roles define our national identity in the twenty-first century.[3] As Americans, we seem to be contemplating who we are, where we came from, how religion and family shape us, and what lies ahead. In those broader musings, gender roles will surely remain central to our conversations about American national identity.

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NOTES

1. My use of the term "War on Terror" is not intended as an endorsement of this concept. Rather, I am interested in the way that it has been used to define American national identity in recent years.

2. There is a debate over whether these claims resulted in actual political gains for various groups.

3. See, for instance, the titles on a recent *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list show that Americans are reading about our founding period, about religion and its implications for social life, and about the nation's current challenges and standing in the world. This includes books like *John Adams* by David McCullough; *Ladies of Liberty* by Cokie

Roberts; *America's Hidden History* by Kenneth Davis; *A Voyage Long and Strange* by Tony Horwitz; *Escape* by Carolyn Jessop; *The Reason for God*, by Timothy Keller; *Under the Banner of Heaven* by Jon Krakauer; *Infidel* by Ayaan Hirsi Ali; *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, *The Post-American World* by Fareed Zakaria; *The Audacity of Hope* by Barack Obama; *The Assault on Reason* by Al Gore; *Armageddon in Retrospect* by Kurt Vonnegut; *The Omnivore's Dilemma* by Michael Pollan; *Common Wealth* by Jeffrey Sachs; and *The World Is Flat* by Thomas Friedman.

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