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Masculine Rivalries and Security: The US and UK in Iraq and Afghanistan

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CLAIRE DUNCANSON, JUL 4 2014

In *The Morning After* (1993), Cynthia Enloe takes issue with the fact that comparisons between different masculinities in different societies are rarely used as springboards for investigating the “big questions of international politics”. She argues that on observing men of other nationalities, “[s]ometimes men try to mimic those forms of masculinity; at other times they view the alternatives with contempt and go home with a renewed sense of the superiority of their own home-grown formulas for being ‘real men’” (ibid, 5). These relationships and rivalries matter, she suggests in all her work, because militarization and war rely on notions of masculinity in a myriad of subtle and not-so-subtle ways. From a drill sergeant’s gendered script designed to create men out of boys, to the ways in which ideas of standing firm and facing up to rogue states can structure world politics, “[u]nderstanding the international workings of masculinity is important to making feminist sense of international politics” (Enloe 1989, 200).

This article concerns the ways in which soldiers in two NATO militaries, the UK and US, constructed their masculinity identities in relation to each other in the post 9/11 operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the implications of this rivalry for understanding the potential of ‘stabilisation’ operations for achieving security.

Wise Britain and Cowboy America

A discourse of British expertise at counterinsurgency operations dominated as the British entered Basra, Iraq’s second biggest city, in March 2003. The British Army’s Counterinsurgency Field Manual of 2001 claimed that “The experience of numerous small wars has provided the British Army with a unique insight into this demanding form of conflict”, and this claim was echoed by military scholars in both the UK and US (Mockaitis 1990, 146; Nagl 2002; Cassidy 2004). The consensus was that while the UK ‘got’ counterinsurgency, the US decidedly did not (Betz and Cormack 2009; also see Devenny and McLean 2005; Porter 2010).

From the outset, British soldiers contrasted their approach to the mission with that of their US allies. General Sir Mike Jackson, then Head of the British Army, attributed the chaos in Baghdad to the American’s excessively combative and confrontational style: ‘Part of the problem was the posture of the US army in their tanks, in their Darth Vader kit with the wraparound sunglasses and helmets and flak jackets and everything else. There was no real rapport between the US army and ordinary citizens’ (cited in Ledwidge 2011, 31). British soldiers on the ground identified with and reinforced this discourse, such as Kevin Mervin, who noted in his account of the conflict: ‘You simply cannot stop a British soldier from having a laugh with locals; it’s in our blood to make friends and help where we can, and always will be. Winning the hearts and minds, I think it’s called’ (Mervin 2005, 199). Another British soldier reported to a journalist that ‘We are trained for every inevitability and we do this better than the Americans’ (Harman 2003).

Crucially, this supposed expertise was not just presented as a question of tactics or best practice. It was presented as a question of identity – this is who we are: civilized, rational, moderate, intelligent, pragmatic, and restrained. In part resulting from the way in which comparatively limited resources in the second world war encouraged British soldiers to construct masculinity around “natural superiority” rather than show of force, “an understated professionalism” and sense of “decency, honour and fair play” have come to define British military masculinity (Rose 2004; Higate 2012).

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The military narrative of British expertise at winning hearts and minds was echoed in wider British societal discourse of the time, reinforcing the sense of wise Britain and cowboy America. British military historian John Keegan wrote in his account of the 2003 invasion of Iraq: “As the entry into Basra was to prove, the British Army’s mastery of the methods of urban warfare is transferable. What had worked in Belfast could be made to work again in Basra” (Keegan 2004, 175–6). Journalist John Gray argued that the British were more subtle and effective than the heavy-handed Americans (Gray 2006). Alistair Campbell, British PM Tony Blair’s Director of Communications between 1997 and 2003, put it most succinctly: “We believed in peacekeeping. They believed in war fighting. We were good at both. They were only focused on one, so didn’t adapt quickly enough to changed circumstances” (Campbell 2007: 690).

Again, it is important to note that this is not just a debate about best practice, but about identity and Britain’s place in the world. As Patrick Porter (2010, 364–5) convincingly contends:

With its empire lost, its armed forces shrunk, and its post-imperial strategic role ambiguous, the complex business of policing foreign lands became a site through which Britons articulated a relationship between the old hegemon and the new. Britain as junior partner may have lost its world power; but it had the historic role of educating the new and untutored hegemon about keeping the peace and fathoming the Arab/Islamic world. Indeed, at the military-strategic level, Britain with its hard-won colonial expertise could teach Americans about the complexity of modern soldiering. This was a reassertion in the military context of the “Greece-Rome” mentality.

Busting the Myth of British Expertise

As the 2000s progressed, three developments combined to challenge the narrative of British superiority at counterinsurgency and stabilisation operations. The first was the development of new US doctrine and practice. The US military adapted their approach, aiming to be more population-centric; that is, minimizing civilian casualties, and taking risks to get better intelligence so as to be able to target hardliners whilst attempting to win over other insurgents and to build relations with the civilian population (Wither 2009). The second was the increasingly apparent failure of the British Army to achieve security in Basra. Whilst this can be attributed to a number of causes, not all British inadequacies, the experience went some way to puncture the myth of particular proficiency (Betz and Cormack 2009; Dodge 2010; Ucko 2010). The third was the exposure of the brutality of many historical counterinsurgency campaigns fought by the British, such as Malaya, Kenya, and Northern Ireland. Many recent accounts now testify to the way in which any particular British expertise at restraining the use of force always been a myth (Anderson 2005; Hack 1999; Stubbs 1993). By the time of the ‘surge’ of American troops in Iraq in 2008, there was little basis, if indeed there ever had been, for claims of British expertise.

Interestingly, when we turn to British military masculinities in Afghanistan, despite a) the myth busting – in Iraq and historical campaigns, b) new doctrine and practice by US, and c) the very real difficulties of actually ascertaining whether force used in Iraq and Afghanistan is ‘minimum’ or not (Bennet 2010), the British military discourse disparaging the US for being too gung-ho doesn’t disappear from British soldiers’ personal narratives about the war. It is less dominant than in reflections on Iraq, reflecting perhaps a *growing* acceptance within the British military that the rhetoric was indeed myth, but British soldiers based in Afghanistan continue to make statements about American incompetence at winning hearts and minds in their narratives. In his reflections, Captain Beattie, making observations about a US Forward Operating Base, continues the accusation that the Americans do not know how to build relations with local populations: “You could tell by the Stars and Stripes that flew sneeringly above the base. In full sight of the local population, this wasn’t how to win friends and influence people” (Beattie 2010, 32). Similarly, Lt Col Joe O’Sullivan reported to journalist Sam Kiley that the American Special Forces were far too keen to drop bombs on potential Taliban without exploring alternative tactics that would put fewer civilians at risk and then take pride in their prowess with what he refers to as “some very unattractive chest-beating” (cited in Kiley 2010, 219). In the face of all the evidence to the contrary, the British discourse of the US as excessively violent and confrontational cowboy warriors proved fairly resilient in British soldiers’ personal narratives of serving in Afghanistan post 2008 (for more examples, see Duncanson 2013).

The Soldier-Scholar as the Hybrid Hegemonic Masculinity

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Meanwhile, in the US military, the rise of the “soldier-scholar” has been documented, the new breed of “doctorate-festooned” senior military (or ex-military) men such as David Petraus, David Kilcullen, and John Nagl, all of whom have been involved in policy making for Iraq and Afghanistan (Khalili 2011). All advance a version of population-centric counterinsurgency, focused on minimising the use of force, winning over civilians, and aimed at building peace, security, and a stable state. The analogy used in the new US counterinsurgency doctrine, Field Manual 3-24, authored by Patreus and Nagl (United States 2007), is that of the surgeon replacing the boxer as the ideal approach to soldiering. Khalili notes that the boxer is the “ultimate icon of raw physical masculinity: a pugilist who is nevertheless blind and is wasting energy flailing at unseen opponents and perhaps causing unintended harm” (Khalili 2011, 1487). The surgeon, meanwhile, cuts “out cancerous tissue while keeping other vital organs intact” (ibid). As Khalili (ibid) points out,

not only does this counter-positioning of boxers and surgeons contain an implicit notion of masculinity, also contains idea of class: The boxer is the working class hero; the surgeon the upper middle class professional. The former is emotional, embodied, perhaps even irrational; the latter is intellectual, cool, steady-handed.

In 2012, US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates criticised the British forces, along with other European allies, arguing in an almost perfect mirror of the British discourse from the early days in Iraq, that they do not get how to do population centric COIN, and have a tendency to deploy too much air power (Norton-Taylor 2008; Spiegel 2008).

Thus, both the US and UK militaries could be said to be claiming a superior masculine identity – one more moderate, restrained, civilised, enlightened, compassionate. One mechanism through which this is achieved is the disparaging of the ally – not as weak, the traditional way of asserting masculine superiority, but as “hyper-masculine”, excessively violent, and combative. Gender scholars have observed this phenomenon in a range of contexts: as masculinities ‘soften,’ those aspects of masculinity that have been rejected – excessive violence or overt misogyny, for example – are projected onto less privileged groups of men (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 1994; Hooper 2001, 74). It is perhaps particularly striking in militaries, however, as the traditional masculine practices have been so central to military identity.

What is particularly interesting is the sense that the new model of military masculinity is something of a “hybrid” (Demetriou 2001; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). There is a consensus in US military and popular discourse that the Brits suffered humiliating defeats in both Basra and Helmand. As well as not grasping counterinsurgency and depending on the blunt instrument of air power, then, the British are also not strong enough, not good enough at combat. The soldier in soldier-scholar remains all important. Two strategies of subordination are thus being deployed simultaneously. Both the US and the UK could be said to wish to position themselves in the middle ground – not too gung-ho, but not too conciliatory, either. This is sometimes made explicit. Even when they are disparaging the Americans for being “all brawn, no brain,” British military personnel I have spoken to have been horrified at the suggestion they are anything like the peacekeeping militaries of Nordic states. They might respond well to journalist Timothy Garton Ash’s positive characterisation of the UK as the “ideal *via media*” between the “cheese-eating surrender monkeys and fire-eating war junkies!” (Garton Ash 2006).

Implications

If the ideal soldier is this hybrid model, it could be argued to be good for peace and security. The best soldiers and best strategies in areas of conflict will be those that look to put the security of civilian populations first. Yet, as many feminist scholars have pointed out, things are never so simple. A closer look at these new brain-and-brawn masculinities makes clear that they are in part constructed in relation to Afghan and Iraqi Others, both real and imagined. Many British and US soldiers have commented on the Iraqi and Afghan security forces that they have been training and mentoring as part of the counterinsurgency operations. In their reflections, these men are often feminized (as lazy, cowardly, weak, poor fighters, undisciplined) or racialized (as manipulative, devious, disloyal, corrupt) (see Duncanson 2013). Local Iraqi and Afghan men are often described in similar ways, and their treatment of women has come in for particular attention as a key signifier of their inherent primitiveness and violence (ibid). In the post 9/11 interventions, then, we see continuation of this “time honoured story of good men and nations fighting bad men in order to protect racialized women” (Hunt 2010). British soldiers tend to present Iraq and Afghanistan as essentially

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backward – unsuited to democracy. Poverty, violence, and low levels of education are not just descriptors, but become innate traits of the global south. Moreover, there is a lack of contextualisation – as if the west had played no part in the violence and poverty in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As a result, the idea of the soldier-scholar as the solution to insecurity is deeply problematic for many (Khalili 2011). In the light of the evidence that the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have done very little for ordinary people's security, and have arguably facilitated the spread of a neoliberal market exacerbating the situation (Kandiyoti 2007), some have drawn the conclusion that these new military masculinities are little more than smokescreens, seemingly progressive, but distracting our attention from the continuing violence done in the name of achieving security and a stable state. This is a real risk, but we perhaps should not entirely dismiss this apparent rivalry between western military allies, where superior masculinities are linked to restraint over the use of force and the ability to build relationships with civilians. If the UK or US militaries are ever to be used in genuinely "cosmopolitan peace operations" (Beebe and Kaldor 2010; Woodhouse and Ramsbotham 2005; Elliot and Cheeseman 2004), this shift in soldier identity may prove to be important.

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