**A Feminist Reading of Foreign Policy under Trump: Mother of All Bombs, Wall, and the “Locker Room Banter”**

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This article offers a gendered reading of three recent events under newly elected Donald J. Trump: the attempt to build a ‘beautiful wall’ between Mexico and the United States, the recent MOAB military strike in Afghanistan and the ‘locker room talk’ scandal that emerged during the 2016 election campaign. I relate these events to international security by disturbing the cultural grammar on which these events are founded and respond to the feminist call that ‘the personal is international and the international is personal’ (Enloe [1989] 2000). A feminist American foreign policy analysis of ‘100 Days of Trump’ brings attention to the ways in which bordering practices like wall-building and military interventions are rendered legitimate through constructed gendered tropes that in turn, transform the wider war on terrorism into a private ‘family affair.’ In this light, military strikes are not political acts requiring legitimation in the public sphere but instead are necessary disciplinary tools unqualified for political discussion.

The field of International Security addresses questions about the interactions between more or less secure sovereign states in an anarchical international system but tends to ignore questions about gender. In this view, states are considered as clearly separated entities in an anarchical international system ‘who’ become ‘alive’ by being attributed anthropomorphic qualities: they have a ‘body’ (the nation) and a mind (the state) with a capacity to think ‘rationally’ (Wadley 2010, 38). As Wadley (2010, 40) notes, ‘this means that states are gendered, and are gendered in much the same way as people are: through repeated performances.’ An example of this performance is the recent launch of the MOAB attack in the Nangarhar province. On 13 April 2017, the United States military sent the largest non-nuclear bomb to Afghanistan, which impact, according to Afghans, ‘felt like the heavens were falling’ (Rasmussen for *The Guardian* 2017).

This colloquialism, which has dominated most accounts of the attack, has three important functions. First, it feminises the Other (the Islamic State) by forcing the Islamic State to be passive through the act of a feminine actor, the ‘Mother.’ According to White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer (2017), the ‘Mother’ was launched to deny the Islamic State ‘operational access.’ In turn, the feminisation of the Islamic State reaffirms US masculinity and agency. Linda Åhäll (2015) argues that ideas of motherhood and maternalism are valued as agency in IR. Indeed, the ‘Mother attack’ is written as a powerful manifestation of US power. The strike is described with action verbs underpinned by sexualised masculine tropes of aggression, all in the active voice. The Mother of all Bombs, is ‘designed for *destroying* underground targets but is not a deep-earth penetrating weapon’ (Rasmussen 2017 emphasis added). It ‘*exploded* above a complex of caves and tunnels’ and ‘*killed* dozens of ISIS fighters’ (CNN 2017 emphasis added). This excitement was shared by Fox News talkshow host Geraldo Rivera and guests, who broadcasted the video over the top of country singer Toby Keith singing ‘courtesy of the red, white and blue’ and praised the attack as ‘what freedom looks like’ (Jamieson 2017).

Making weapons exciting is not new. Carol Cohn (1987) has written in length about the phallic imagery that suffused the world of defence intellectuals during the Cold War. Cohn (1987, 693) suggests that the words that described nuclear weapons as ‘vertical erectors, thrust-to-weight ratios, soft lay downs, deep penetration’ constitute a form of distance by removing military strategists from the possibilities of nuclear destruction and instead making them thrilling. As Duncanson and Eschle (2008, 549) argue, ‘it makes the nuclear arms race seem the stuff of funny locker-room rivalry, denying its deadly consequences.’ While action and sexualised verbs describing the strike has the potential to make military endeavours exciting while minimising harm, the reference to a ‘Mother’ also associates the strike with something that is instinctive, maternal and thus the product of a natural order. The work of Ruth Bloch (1978) on the rise of the Moral Mother in America in the mid-nineteen Century is quite insightful here. From the eighteenth century onwards, printed literature began to stress the unique value of the maternal role (Bloch 1978, 109). It merged New England Puritan ideas about women as ‘help-meet,’ a form of domestic competence in assisting roles for men and essentially female subordination to them, and eighteenth century notions of purity, femininity, and ornamental refinement. In examining childcare books of this period, Bloch (1978, 112) finds that mothers, who were considered as the natural carers of their infant, were also expected to ‘establish gentle but firm discipline as early as possible.’

In this ‘Mother of All Bombs’ war story, the United States is made the natural and legitimate actor who can nurse the Islamic State and be in charge of their physical management (‘denying them operational space’). More importantly, this war story equates the attack to a moral mission, just as women were idealised above all as ‘transmitters of moral values’ (Bloch 1978). Concomitantly, the ultimate goal of the strike becomes one of protection, moral directive and nurture, defining the relationship between a Moral Mother and her infant, and not one of war, aggressiveness, or masculinity. Launching the GBU-43/B in the Nangahar province is a moral duty of care, just as Moral Mothers had a duty to protect their infant. Therefore, calling the largest airdrop munitions in the US arsenal a ‘Mother’ also infantilises the Islamic State. In this construction, bombing the Islamic State is not an act of war, but a necessary act of discipline of badly behaved children.[[1]](#footnote-1) Family tropes shape perception of military interventions by making certain interpretations more visible than others. For instance, referring to NATO at the end of the Cold War as a ‘nuclear family’ that welcomed ex-Soviet countries who ‘just got divorced’ and ‘looking to get married immediately’ attempt to naturalise unequal relations of power between countries in the international system (Costigliola 1997, 163).

The second repeated performance reaffirming the gendered nature of the United States involves the practice of wall-building. At the heart of ‘America First’ and ‘make America great again’ is the idea of a community that is in decline. Not only does America ‘not win anymore’ but America is letting others control and dominate the American nation. On the one hand, the nation is gendered by acquiring a status of being threatened and in need of protection. ‘Bringing back borders’ here constitutes a practice that protects this gendered community against the ‘ravages of other countries’ (Trump 2017), which according to Trump (2016b), can be made secure again by the erection of a wall. Indeed, the ‘American carnage stops right here and stops right now’ (Trump 2017). On the other hand, the wall reinstates the state as masculine protector of the nation. This wall is ‘physical, tall, powerful, beautiful, southern’ and importantly, it is ‘impenetrable’ (Trump 2016b). The *raison d’être* of the nation-state is thus preserved through the fencing of the border, by physically locking *out* immigrant Others and other threatening states.

Other security practices, by contrast, lock bodies *in*. On 7 October 2016, at the height of Donald J. Trump’s campaign, a lewd video revealed Trump boasting about ‘grabbing women by the pussy’ and ‘moving onto a woman like a bitch’ (Trump 2016a).This language was described as illustrating ‘rape culture’ (Dirks 2016) according to the *New York Times*, ‘constitut[ing] rape culture’ (Mahdawi 2016) according to *The Guardian*, and ‘directly contributing to rape culture’ (Rivesz 2016) according to *The Independent*. Trump constructed the locker room as a non-political space, in which the agency of female bodies was irrelevant or was subjected to the power of a masculine other. Indeed, ‘they [women] let you do it, you can do whatever you want’ (Trump in Rivesz 2016). In response, Trump (2016a) apologised ‘if anyone was offended’ and stated that his words were ‘locker room banter, a private conversation that took place many years ago.’ By dismissing this incident as ‘locker room banter,’ it implied that what goes on in the locker room should be left and ‘locked in’ the private sphere. Yet Trump’s comments in the ‘locker room’ are not simply a private matter of female agency. It entails a much more complex construction of a gendered subject along national lines. Forms of power between men and women in seemingly ‘private’ spaces are connected to forms of power in the international system (Enloe 2013, 40). ‘National security’ is gendered by reproducing the protector (state)/protected (nation) script. As Hansen (2000, 59 original emphasis) notes, ‘gender security’ cannot be examined outside of the concept of ‘national security’ but ‘the discourse of ‘national security’ might silence women’s security problems when “women’s problems” *conflict* with the securities of the national community.’ Indeed, addressing gender security in the locker room may entail unlocking the American nation to encounter the Other, which is far from Trump’s strategy in building the beautiful wall.

For feminist scholars of security and foreign policy, the research agenda is widened by expanding the analysis beyond war and international conflict to include poverty, patriarchy, domestic violence, rape (Sjoberg 2010, 4), and essentially ‘locker room banter.’ The goal here is one of internationalising the locker room by examining the scandal as a security problem, not only of women in the locker room, but embedded in the construction of the American nation as an insecure community. Disturbing the cultural grammar[[2]](#footnote-2) of security policy thus involves seeing the gendered nature of military interventions entwined with what goes on in the locker room. The US-Mexico wall attempts to materialise and maintain gendered dichotomies between the national and the international, the inside and the outside, and importantly between the private/locker room and the public/political room. It is not only a wall between two states; it can be problematized to border two sets of spaces: the American nation and the locker room. ‘Winning again’ by regaining borders is thus tantamount to locking power hierarchies in the locker room and not simply a matter of ‘national security.’

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1. The attack followed the killing of a US special forces soldier in the region of Nangahar (BBC News 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more on the ‘cultural grammar of body politics’ see Åhäll (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)