

# **The Myth of Jessica Lynch:** *Gender, Ethnicity, and Neo-imperialism in the War on Terror*

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The rescue mission to free Pfc. Jessica Lynch from her captivity in an Iraqi hospital in March 2003 enthralled the American public. This small-town, 19-year-old blonde was captured by Iraqis only after she put up a fierce fight, sustaining multiple bullet wounds, resisting capture until she ran out of bullets, and witnessing the death of her comrades. She was taken to a military hospital, where she was purportedly tortured and eventually rescued in a daring feat of American military bravado. For her bravery and determination, Lynch became at once America's sweetheart, its hero, and a household name.<sup>1</sup> A *New York Times* article from a month after her rescue features a quotation from her neighbour Mr. Nelson: "She was smart and gentle, a good country girl," he said. "I think the reason she survived through this is that she is a true angel."<sup>2</sup>

As time went on, however, the story of this "true angel" was revealed to be quite different from initial media portrayals. The dramatization of her search and rescue, plus the original tale of her capture, suited the American military and the administration at the time because it bolstered public resolve and support for the war in Iraq. As Nicolas D. Kristof wrote in an op-ed piece for *The New York Times* later that year, "facts were subordinated to politics, and truth was treated as an endlessly stretchable fabric."<sup>3</sup> This fabric is just one part of the tapestry of truths surrounding the "War on Terror." I will analyze this tapestry in order to pull apart the threads of the narrative.

The Lynch case demonstrates two (of many) ongoing political processes: the tendency to characterize women in the

military (and indeed, in society more broadly) as “gentle” and “angelic,” and therefore incapable of violence; and the ability of the media and government to manipulate identity and “truth” to suit their own purposes. An analysis of the intersection of gender and war reveals many important and under-examined points. The US-led War on Terror has transformed the traditional concept of war as military combat between two states. This particular war is carried out with a few key interests in mind: neo-imperialism, and the preservation of American hegemony globally, and especially in the Middle East. The events of 9/11 were the catalyst for more aggressive American nationalist military expansion overseas. In order to justify the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the administration under George W. Bush, along with mainstream media, manipulated categories of gender, ethnicity, and imperialism. I will argue that these politicized categories are problematic for women because they give strength and power to certain actors and values while weakening or excluding others.

The scope of my analysis will focus the production and maintenance of the narrative of the War on Terror – not on the “real” intentions or goals of the American administration or military. Instead, I will narrow the scope of my analysis to the evolving construction of the narrative in the United States (US) in the years 2001-2003. The War on Terror relied upon (I) hegemonic masculinity and the prototype of the hyper-masculine American soldier, (II) the maintenance and projection of “White” America, and (III) a modern-day civilizing mission of “female liberation” in Iraq. All three of these conceptualizations impact women negatively domestically and internationally, as they neglect a multiplicity of intersecting genders, ethnicities, and class, leading to inequalities both within and among societies. My case study will feature the saga of Jessica Lynch and her cohorts Shoshana Johnson and Lori Piestewa in order to demonstrate the process of policing gender and racial norms. First, however, I will address the more extensive ongoing nexus involving gender and war.

An analysis of the American military is crucial for men and women globally. The continuing narrative of the War on Terror reveals the complex construction of “truths” – about masculinity, femininity, ethnicity, and class (to name a few). These constructions represent, and reinforce, international relations and society as a whole. In turn, social, economic, and political events provide the context within which stories operate. Lynch is just one case among a plethora of problematic fabrications within the global security narrative. In this instance, women and the feminine are symbols used in the manipulations of facts – be it in their portrayal as victims, as soldiers, or as the exotic Other. This process reflects global politics as a whole, which privileges the masculine, and all norms associated with it, over the feminine. Charlotte Hooper calls these divides “gendered dichotomies,” and believes they lead to the devaluation of the feminine, creating a “residual ‘other.’”<sup>4</sup>

It becomes even more problematic when these gendered dichotomies intersect with militarism. The hyper-masculine institution of the military serves to reinforce patriarchal systems in society as a whole, further bolstering this (false) gender binary that privileges the masculine over the feminine. As Carol Cohn writes, “gender ideology is used in the service of militarization.”<sup>5</sup> The parallel circumstances of the US presence in Iraq, and the presence of women in the military, address a larger historical legacy: “The immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks [were] a transformative period during which issues of gender were especially salient.”<sup>6</sup> War allowed female soldiers like Lynch, Johnson, and Piestewa to escape the traditional locus of the feminine, the private sphere, and assume a role in the public sphere. War permitted them to temporarily inhabit “male roles.”

Although “women in the military pose a direct challenge to entrenched gendered norms and structures of power,”<sup>7</sup> the case of Jessica Lynch demonstrates how this challenge is weakened or subverted by the deliberate and unintended actions of those in

power, be they the president, bureaucrats in the administration, the military, or mass media. Lynch and other women in the military challenge the status quo because they call into question conventional conceptions of womanhood. Essentialist conceptualizations of women portray them as submissive, sensitive, emotional, foolish, nonviolent, and weak beings, which are contrasted with those of men as aggressive, strong, rational, intellectual, violent, and combative actors.

This reinforces traditional conceptions of the state as a patriarchal, heteronormative entity responsible for the protection of women. Women are represented by the roles of mother, sister, and wife, and by extension, as the vassal for the state itself through reproduction; they are never valuable in and of themselves. The presence of women in the military destabilizes these gendered norms by placing women in control of their own lives and in traditionally “male” positions of power. The Lynch case is an example of the efforts by those in power to undermine or remove this power by manipulating the female identity and role, both domestically and internationally.

Individual actors stood to gain from Lynch’s story (and it was, after all, a very good story). Once she became famous, her name became profitable. She was the focus of films, interviews, dramatized documentaries, newspaper articles, magazine covers, and books. This intense media focus served to reinforce the American military industrial complex that has come to be inextricably linked with the media system itself.<sup>8</sup> Vron Ware is even more explicit, claiming that the media employs “psychological methods of manipulating information. ...The military, the government and the corporate media are committed to a postmodern infowar waged by means of lies, news management, propaganda, spin, distortion, omission, slant and gullibility.”<sup>9</sup> Contemporary interconnected technologies such as social media and the internet allow for the instant (re)production of news. Lynch, and all of the propaganda associated with her, can reach

millions of people in a matter of seconds. In this way, the manipulation of information has repercussions for people not just in the US, but also all over the world.

At the centre of this media firestorm sits Jessica Lynch. This sensationalized parable offered the American public not only a tale of rescue and redemption, but also a reassuring maintenance of the gender status quo. Lynch, as a woman in the military, challenges the traditional conception of the military as a bastion of masculinity. However, ultimately, she was just a young girl who had to be rescued (by men) when the going got tough. As time wore on, and more facts were revealed about her case, she came to represent much more than that. She was used as justification for the war in Iraq in particular, and the War on Terror more broadly. Her innocence was juxtaposed with the “evil” of the enemy. Lynch was someone the American public could unequivocally get behind – she was everyone’s daughter, sister, or neighbour. “She became at once a cause for the war, a justification for the war, and the human face of the war. The war was no longer a story of the USA conquering Iraq,” but rather, one of good versus evil.<sup>10</sup> Lynch provided a pretty face to cover up the nasty and brutish side of war.

Jessica Lynch exists as a person in the “real world,” but becomes *Private Jessica* within the fictional narrative of her life. She is both an object and a symbol, denied agency in the manipulation of her identity to serve normative and disciplinary functions. She was categorized as a victim in the media through descriptions of her small size, her youth, her status as a non-combat officer, and the injuries she sustained during the ambush. The media reiterated that she could not take care of herself, and thus had to be rescued by “true” (male) soldiers. This image was compounded by the lack of her voice in the media immediately following her capture and rescue. By denying her a voice, the military and the media denied her agency, while simultaneously crafting a “hero narrative” around her.<sup>11</sup> Military officials said that she suffered from amnesia, that she could not talk, and that she was

still recovering. This allowed a story to be constructed around, but not including her. Her unavailability meant she was not able to contradict the “official” story,<sup>12</sup> allowing for the dissemination and duplication of questionable facts.

In addition, the circumstances of her rescue reaffirmed her status as a woman first, and a soldier second. The two identities could not coexist: she could not be both a strong soldier and a strong woman. “As with most binaries, the value of the first term is dependent upon the devaluation of the second.”<sup>13</sup> As a result, a story was constructed around Jessica as a “feminized ... victimized, white ... body in need of protecting and saving. Her body could then become the terrain upon which to (re)enact American sovereign desires.”<sup>14</sup> The portrayal of Lynch as a woman first and a soldier second is important because it allowed for the manipulation of her female identity in ways that her status as a soldier could not be. She could not possess both identities because she could not be characterized as a victim within both. As a soldier she could temporarily inhabit a man’s world, but she could never be a part of it as a woman. This reinforces the concept of gender as a performance. Lynch was vehemently pushed back into the “correct” performance of her femininity in order to not upset the delicate gender balance (and binary).

The story of Lynch may be contrasted with the portrayal (or lack thereof) of Shoshana Johnson and Lori Piestewa in the media. Johnson, an African-American soldier taken prisoner at the same time as Lynch, and Piestewa, a Hopi Indian soldier killed in the same attack, were not subject to the intense media attention Lynch was. Why? As Sjoberg puts it, they did not have the right “face” to represent this new breed of female soldier and to serve as a “heroine for a new militarized femininity.”<sup>15</sup> While Johnson received a bit of media attention, Piestewa was completely neglected in national media. Lynch was selected to ascend to the level of myth because of her perceived suitability to represent America, as it needed to be in the face of war. “Her race, age, and

background identify her with the American heartland and connote ... maximum vulnerability”<sup>16</sup> in ways that neither of the other two women do. The process of “naming” Lynch is tied to the stereotypical and established role of women as “mothers of the nation” responsible for the preservation of national moral and cultural mores. This monolithic portrayal of the female neglects the intersection of race and class. In this conception, “White” America is seen as the only America, when in reality the country comprises a multitude of identities and nationalities.

In the minds of the mass media, Johnson and Piestewa simply did not represent the true face of America, nor the true preservers of national identity. Though the Native American community and her home state of Arizona recognized Piestewa’s courage, her story was overshadowed by the search for, and eventual rescue of, Lynch. “Piestewa and Johnson (and perhaps other women) could not be made into the ideal, militarized woman – so their stories were marginalized.”<sup>17</sup> Their race and their status (Johnson was a single mother of two) made them unsuitable for the symbolic, mythical nature of representation a nation at war required. As a result, neither of their stories was acknowledged by the mass media.

Indeed, the negligence of Johnson’s tale reaffirms the complex nature of American racialized politics. Johnson was unfit as the referent object in the War on Terror because she represents the already problematic Black identity. She could not be sexualized, nor could she be portrayed as an “angel.” Her body had already been marked as illegitimate – she already was the racialized Other. As a Black woman, she represented America’s uneasy segregated past. She was compared to Lynch and labelled “the Other woman, the Other POW, the black single mother, the Other racialized body not even worth saving.”<sup>18</sup> And so, her story was neglected.

As the ideal female soldier, Lynch became the yardstick by which all other female soldiers were measured. They could not help but be labeled inadequate as representing wholesome American heroism. Indeed, to this day, it is nearly impossible to find scholarship on Lori Piestewa. At least Johnson, in an acknowledgement of her bravery, received some media attention. But she is woefully under-represented. Sjolander and Trevenen analyzed six major US newspapers from April 2003 to August 2005 for mention of Lynch. She was referenced in 888 articles. Johnson, in a mere 126.<sup>19</sup> Johnson and Piestewa lacked the supposed purity necessary to represent America and so they could not be the all American soldiers necessary to win hearts and minds domestically. The state needed someone to be contrast with the Arab or Muslim enemy Other, and it had to be someone with certain qualities. Race was a critical marker of identity to be employed as a political weapon. And, as I will argue, the projection of all Americanism was critical to a process of Othering in order to justify the War on Terror.

The US relies on the preservation of a cohesive and solitary “all American” identity in order to maintain their hegemonic and neo-imperial mandate. J. Ann Tickner describes the US as an “empire” – “not in terms of the formal acquisition of territory, but in terms of economic and political control.”<sup>20</sup> The American state’s overwhelming military and economic might allows them to expand and diffuse neoliberal capitalism and Western democracy, all under the guise of liberating states. This form of neo-imperialism allows the US to pursue empire building, but relies on a carefully constructed process of Othering and Orientalism. Race was used to form politicized categories of identification: America and “the West,” opposed to Islam and the Middle East. “In the Lynch narrative, the white angelic hero/victim stands in contrast to the dark uncivilized Iraqi villains.”<sup>21</sup> The US projected a superior vision of bringing “democracy,” “human rights,” and “women’s rights” to a supposedly backwards and barbaric society. In the



battle of “us” versus “the other,” America and its values reign supreme.

The American identity is bolstered by stories like Lynch’s, and the maintenance and replication of treasured values like “democracy.” These values justify the occupation of Muslim and Arab nations.

U.S. Orientalism has legitimated imperial interventions overseas that, unlike older European forms of colonialism, often rest on covert interventions, indirect control, and a discourse of benevolent empire that masks the internal exclusion and violence against native peoples, African Americans, and others.<sup>22</sup>

Contemporary war is characterized not by direct military acquisition, but by more subtle forms of control that disguise the politics of gender and race at play.

In addition, when viewed through a feminist and gendered lens, it is not only the “West” and “Western” women that are seen as needing defending against the threatening male Other, but Muslim women as well. Paternalism is not limited to the domestic realm; it is present in the language of war, in the touting of prototypical American values, and in the imposition of “liberation” internationally. After all, “the civilizing role of Western imperialism [is] in undermining ‘Islamic fascism.’ Nothing was more symbolic of Islamic tyranny than the plight of Muslim women.”<sup>23</sup> This mission to free women could justify the violation of many nations’ sovereignty in the interests of the greater good. The Bush administration in particular held up the “liberation” of Afghan and Iraqi women as one of the primary motivations for the war.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the US was recast as the protector of femininity and as the brave hero rushing in to save the day. And with this, gender was brought to the fore in the War on Terror. By conventional wisdom, men are the typical soldier, and thus, the enemy combatants. Women and children, however, have always been the victims. The War of Terror was no exception: “In the ‘clash of civilizations’ rhetoric as it appears in the United States, women’s oppression is a marker of an inferior society.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, just as Lynch was deployed to represent a value worth defending, so too was Arab and Muslim femininity. The politics of invasion were gendered and racialized. The justifications for the war were inherently more complex than they appeared on the surface.

As Maleiha Malik writes, Muslim women’s bodies have always been used as “a battleground for European and US imperialism.”<sup>26</sup> Lynch’s body was manipulated in the same way that Malik describes. Gender intersects with themes of imperialism to facilitate the process of victimization. Muslim women exist merely as victims of a barbaric Other, denied independence and agency, and are relegated to representing their religion, nation, ethnicity, or race. “The case for new forms of imperialist aggression can be made more readily if the evil posed by the enemy is linked to their oppression of women.”<sup>27</sup> The irony of the US trumpeting this mandate lies in its hypocrisy. How can the American government justify an attack on another country’s sexist policies when equality is seriously lacking at home? Put simply, the public needed a cause to get behind. The mission to save Afghan women from the Taliban regime, or Iraqi women from the repressive policies of Saddam Hussein, was much easier to justify than blatant neo-imperialism.

Another theme emerges to complicate the picture: “The war on terror has been conducted through an extensive exchange of women, albeit primarily at a symbolic level.”<sup>28</sup> This symbolic exchange of women represents their absence as independent agents in the war. Muslim women are pawns on an international political

chessboard just as Lynch is on a domestic one. “They are invoked, but never present. The women on whose behalf this war is being waged are not *our* women, but rather *other* women.”<sup>29</sup> Yet again, women represent the nation state, the bearers of nationality, and the victims in need of defending. Muslim women are denied a place in the highly politicized category of “hard” politics, and yet, are portrayed as innocent and as deserving of rescue. This presents problems not only for Arab women, but for American women as well. Militarizing women may seem emancipatory on the surface, but just as female soldiers cannot be both *woman* and *soldier*, so too can a female American soldier never be truly free: “American women cannot achieve their liberation on the backs of the victims of US imperialism.”<sup>30</sup> It is important to interrogate projects of freedom to identify whom the winners and losers are. Women are never emancipated equally.

The Lynch case is a microcosm for ongoing political processes involving women in the military, and in domestic and international spheres. The American administration and media manipulated the story about Jessica Lynch in order to serve certain actors’ needs. She was portrayed as an innocent victim in need of saving by male soldiers from the barbaric, Arabic Other. Lynch was used as justification for the invasion of Iraq to cover up neo-imperialist interests on the part of the US. The military is a problematic institution for women because it privileges the masculine, and all norms associated with it, over the feminine, leading to the subjugation of women. This in turn reinforces patriarchy and sexist standards in society more generally, victimizing women at home and abroad.

Lynch and other female soldiers temporarily escaped the gender binary through their presence in the military, only to be pushed back through the calculated manipulation of their feminine identities, which served normative and disciplinary functions. Lynch was portrayed as a woman first and a soldier second – never both at once. She was also contrasted with Johnson and Piastewa

in order to preserve the image of “White” America. This in turn created and sustained the opposition of the “US” versus “them,” in an ongoing process of Othering whereby the United States is compared to Iraq and Afghanistan. The War on Terror fuels neo-imperialism in the Middle East by allowing the US to engage in a paternalistic mission of “liberation” for women. Muslim women’s bodies are used without their consent, just as Lynch’s was manipulated to preserve certain values of innocence and victimhood. All of these points serve to reinforce the interlocking processes of power and identity construction that characterize international politics more broadly. Categories of gender, race and ethnicity intersect to form a tapestry of contested truths.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Laura Sjoberg, “Agency, Militarized Femininity and Enemy Others: Observations from the War in Iraq,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 9, no. 1 (2007): 84.
- <sup>2</sup> Douglas Jehl and Jayson Blair, “A Nation at War: The Hometown; Rescue in Iraq and a ‘Big Stir’ in West Virginia,” *The New York Times*, April 3, 2003, para. 24. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/03/us/a-nation-at-war-the-hometown-rescue-in-iraq-and-a-big-stir-in-west-virginia.html?ref=jessicalynch>.
- <sup>3</sup> Nicholas D Kristof, “Saving Private Jessica,” *The New York Times*, June 20, 2003, para. 12. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/20/opinion/saving-private-jessica.html?src=pm>.
- <sup>4</sup> Charlotte Hooper, “Masculinities, IR, and the ‘Gender Variable’: A Cost-benefit Analysis for (Sympathetic) Gender Skeptics,” *Review of International Studies*, 25, (1999): 476.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Kevin Coe, David Domke, Meredith Bagley, Sheryl Cunningham and Nancy Van Leuven, “Masculinity as Political Strategy: George W. Bush, the ‘War on Terrorism,’ and an Echoing Press,” *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, 29, no. 1 (2007): 33.
- <sup>7</sup> Claire Turenne Sjolander and Kathryn Trevenen, “One of the Boys? Gender Disorder in Times of Crisis,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 12, no. 2 (2010): 159.
- <sup>8</sup> Deepa Kumar, “War Propaganda and the (Ab)uses of Women,” *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (2004): 306.

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- <sup>9</sup> Vron Ware, "Info-war and the Politics of Feminist Curiosity," *Cultural Studies* 20, no. 6 (2006): 535.
- <sup>10</sup> Sjoberg, "Agency, Militarized Femininity and Enemy Others," 92.
- <sup>11</sup> Deepa Kumar, "War Propaganda and the (Ab)uses of Women," *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (2004): 301.
- <sup>12</sup> Kumar, "War Propaganda," 305.
- <sup>13</sup> Stacy Takacs, "Jessica Lynch and the Regeneration of American Identity and Power Post- 9/11," *Feminist Media Studies* 5, no. 3 (2005): 298.
- <sup>14</sup> Cristina Masters, "Femina Sacra: The 'war on/of terror,' Women and the Feminine," *Security Dialogue* 40, no. 1 (2009): 36.
- <sup>15</sup> Sjoberg, "Agency, Militarized Femininity and Enemy Others," 86.
- <sup>16</sup> Takacs, "Jessica Lynch," 301.
- <sup>17</sup> Laura Sjoberg, "Agency, Militarized Femininity and Enemy Others," 87.
- <sup>18</sup> Masters, "Femina Sacra," 37.
- <sup>19</sup> Sjolander and Trevenen, "One of the Boys?" 171.
- <sup>20</sup> J. Ann Tickner, "On the Frontlines or Sidelines of Knowledge and Power? Feminist Practices of Responsible Scholarship," *International Studies Review* 8, (2006): 384.
- <sup>21</sup> Kumar, "War Propaganda," 302.
- <sup>22</sup> Sunaina Maira, "'Good' and 'Bad' Muslim Citizens: Feminists, Terrorists, and U.S. Orientalisms," *Feminist Studies* 35, no. 3 (2009): 634.
- <sup>23</sup> Salma Yaqoob, "Muslim Women and War on Terror," *Feminist Review* 88, (2008): 150.
- <sup>24</sup> Sunera Thobani, "White Wars: Western Feminisms and the 'War on terror,'" *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 169-170.
- <sup>25</sup> Dana Cloud, "'To Veil the Threat of Terror': Afghan Women and the clash of civilizations in the Imagery of the U.S. War on Terrorism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 90, no. 3 (2004): 289.
- <sup>26</sup> Salma Yaqoob, "Muslim Women," 151.
- <sup>27</sup> Ware, "Info-war," p. 528.
- <sup>28</sup> Gargi Bhattacharyya, "Sex, Shopping and Security," *Feminist Media Studies* 11, no. 1 (2011): 15.
- <sup>29</sup> Masters, "Feminine Sacra," 29-30.
- <sup>30</sup> Kumar, "War Propaganda," p. 309.