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War on Terror as a “Fight for the Rights and Dignity of Women”

A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE U.S. ‘LIBERATION’ CAMPAIGN
FOR AFGHAN WOMEN

Jessica Pacwa

Abstract

The events of September 11, 2001 (9/11) continue to morph American identity. 9/11 warranted a frame – a narrative – to explain and assign meaning to the sudden death of nearly three-thousand men and women.¹ The phrase “war on terror” was first used by George W. Bush in an address to Congress on September 20, 2001, and since then, the term has entered into common global lexicon. The strict binaries that confine American discourses in this War on Terror – civility/barbarity, freedom/oppression, Judea-Christianity/Islam, progress/tradition, the protector/the protected and democracy/tyranny – are not unique; rather, they are rooted in imperialist, colonial, and Orientalist legacies, where narrative often relies on gendered rhetoric – a key aspect that this paper focuses on. It argues that gendered discourse and politicalized representations of Afghan women worked to gain domestic support for the U.S.-led occupation in Afghanistan. In response to waning domestic support for the war in Afghanistan, government officials, media outlets, and aid organizations invoke mythic war narratives (i.e. arguments about good versus evil) – which often rely on the victimization of Afghan women – as a means to gain bipartisan domestic support for military involvement. While I examine the war on terror frame generally, my aim for this paper is to specially address the U.S. liberation campaign for Afghan women by examining U.S. policy and speech discourse on the matter using critical discourse analysis (CDA).

Introduction

Less than one month after the September 11, 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks, a U.S.-led coalition invaded Afghanistan to fight al-Qaeda – thus launching what George W. Bush would later call a “global war on terror.” When American policy shifted to include the overthrow of the Taliban, the issue of Afghan women’s rights became a global concern as the American media began to mainstream the Taliban’s abuse of women. On November 17, 2001, U.S. first-lady Laura Bush and the U.S. State Department delivered a joint humanitarian call to action in the war to fight terrorism. The State Department’s report – *The Taliban’s War Against Women* – detailed the degradation of women’s rights and livelihoods under Taliban rule and called on Congress to pass the “Afghan Women and Children Relief Act of 2001.” The report then ended with an analysis of women’s status in the aftermath of the U.S.-led bombing campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom): “Today, with Kabul and other Afghan cities liberated from the Taliban, women are returning to their rightful place in Afghan society –

¹ National September 11 Memorial & Museum, “The Names on the Memorial,” <https://www.911memorial.org/names-memorial-0>.

the place they and their families choose to have.”² Laura Bush echoed similar sentiments in her portrayal of Afghan women:

Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror -- not only because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us. Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes... Yet the terrorists who helped rule that country now plot and plan in many countries. And they must be stopped. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.³

Apart from the sweeping generalizations that Laura Bush makes in the radio address, her speech functions in three key ways: it gives the “War on Terror” a moral prerogative; it expands the military response to 9/11 beyond the boundaries of Afghanistan, and it makes a call to action on behalf of women everywhere – including women on the home front in the U.S. due to her “symbolic elision of women and the nation.”⁴

9/11 was a direct attack on American soil, so the George W. Bush administration had no need to convince the public of a U.S. military response. Although the kinetic phase of the military response in Afghanistan had ended – as evidenced by State and first-lady crediting the “liberation” of Afghan women to U.S. military gains, both accounts intimately link militaristic and humanitarian interventionism together while simultaneously indicating that there is a need to expand the response to terrorism beyond the boundaries of Afghanistan. Now, more than seventeen years later, the United States military is truly involved in a “global” war with its active engagement in eighty nations on six continents – including Afghanistan.⁵ Yet, this raises a

² Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, “Report on the Taliban’s War Against Women,” *U.S. Department of State*, Nov. 17, 2001, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/drl/rls/6185.htm>.

³ Laura Bush, “Radio Address by Mrs. Bush,” *Office of the First Lady*, Nov. 17, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011117.html>.

⁴ Ruth Jacobson, *Women & Wars: Contested Histories, Uncertain Futures* ed. by Carol Cohn (Malden: Polity Press, 2013), 114.

⁵ Stephanie Savell and 5W Infographics, “This Map Shows Where in the World the U.S. Military is Combatting Terrorism,” *Smithsonian*, Jan. 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/map-shows-places-world-where-us-military-operates-180970997/>.

fundamental question: To what extent, did framing the war on terror as a “fight for the rights and dignity of women” rally public support for the expanding the scope of war beyond the boundaries of Afghanistan?

My main research question is – How has the United States government framed the plight of Afghan women within the larger “war on terror” metanarrative? My secondary questions are – To what extent, if any, does the media echo similar themes concerning Afghan women’s rights, and how much influence have these portrayals had, if any, on state policy and aid programs? I hope to reveal whether or not the utilization of women’s rights discourse and the sensationalized representations of Afghan women were a means to garner domestic bipartisan support for the U.S. occupation in Afghanistan. I also want to understand the way in which these politicized representations serve as an easily understood symbol in measuring U.S. success and/or failure in the rebuilding/occupation phase of the war in Afghanistan.

This article puts aside leaders’ motivations and deals specifically with their ability to garner international action for Afghan women in the war on terror. In particular, I examine the rhetorical relationship between the media and state discourse on women’s rights and liberation in Afghanistan, to understand the extent to which each mirrors the other’s portrayal/argument. To understand the power of this rhetorical relationship on public opinion, I reference the agenda-setting theory, which holds that what the media decides to expose in certain countries correlates with the public’s views of things such as politics, economy and culture. In addition, I consult postcolonial and postmodern-feminist scholarship that addresses the extent to which these politicized portrayals are beneficial and/or counterproductive to improving the plight of Afghan women.

Despite the oversaturation of media reports concerning Afghan women, there is little mention of the suffering of Afghan men under the Taliban, and although it is without question that women suffer disproportionately compared to men in wartime, there seems to be an asymmetrical media and aid focus on improving women's economic and political mobility – which I hypothesize might have unintended social consequences. I also posit that an absence of balanced gendered aid might be an indicator that the administration's instrumentalization of women's rights rhetoric was a means to reframe the military response to 9/11 in humanitarian terminology – which would function as a way of gaining democratic support for a continued U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. Framing the war on terror using twin rhetorics of warfare and philanthropic language seems like a plausible means to gain the Left's support – especially considering Clinton's blunder in the Rwandan Genocide and the Kosovo conflict less than a decade earlier. Or perhaps the invocation of women's rights rhetoric was one way in which the U.S. reinforced its international image as the benevolent rescuer – especially after receiving negative publicity for its bombing campaign after accidentally bombing a wedding party.

To analyze the nature of this gendered discourse and its implications, I conduct a critical discourse analysis (CDA), which seeks to uncover how relations of power and dominance are discursively created in a given society.⁶ A central notion of CDA is that it recognizes that specific forms of discourses – those of politics and media – are in themselves a power source, and if an individual can influence people's knowledge or opinions, then that individual “indirectly may control (some of) their actions, as we know from persuasion and manipulation.”⁷

⁶ Teun A. van Dijk, “Critical Discourse Analysis, *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed by Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 353.

⁷ Dijk, “Critical Discourse Analysis, *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, 354.

I find that the latter is especially relevant when discussing the rally around the flag phenomena, which I will briefly discuss in my concluding remarks.

Literature Review

This section focuses on the scholarship most influential to this research, which examines the way in which gendered discourse and politicized representations of Afghan women operate as a discursive tool. Understanding how Afghan women's rights are portrayed/articulated within the United States' "war on terror" frame may explain certain presumptions or limited-scope policies and aid programs targeting gender equality in Afghanistan. Although there is not an abundance of literature specifically addressing my research question (likely because the U.S. is still actively involved in Afghanistan), there are essentially two divisions of literature addressing the central themes related to my research question – that which deals with the rhetorical/linguistic component of my research question and the other which examines the historical and gendered rhetorical origins as well as consequences of *politically* motivated claims concerning the "liberation" of the "third-world" woman. This section should provide the foundation for my research into understanding how the "protector and the protected" trope operates within the war on terror metanarrative and how other related binaries – good/evil, freedom/tyranny, civilization/barbarianism, Judeo-Christianity/Islam, progress/tradition – implicitly carry implications for representing Afghan women. The purpose of my research is to understand how these subframes coalesce to form the war on terror meta-frame and to interrogate its implications for women in Afghanistan.

The U.S. State and American Media's Gatekeeping Role in the Post-9/11 World

9/11 commanded global media attention not only because of the scale and magnitude of life lost but also because an attack by a non-state actor on American-soil was unprecedented. In a discourse analysis of U.S. newspapers regarding the war on terror, Michael Ryan reveals that editorial writers for America's ten largest newspaper "presented a singular narrative that supported military intervention in the war against terrorism" while simultaneously assuming "positive outcomes."⁸ Homogeneous framing is problematic because the power of news frames can be self-reinforcing.⁹ Edward Said speaks on the dangers between "an almost perfect correspondence between prevailing government policy and the ideology ruling news presentation and selection (an agenda set by certified experts, hand in hand with media managers) keeps the United States' imperial perspective toward the non-Western world consistent."¹⁰

According to Cobb and Elder, key decision makers – firstly the U.S. president and secondly Congress – are the "ultimate guardians of the formal agenda,"¹¹ and "through the manipulation of bias and prevailing values, those who wield power may stifle, or reinterpret an issue and thus prevent it from gaining agenda status."¹² First introduced by Max McCombs and Donald Shaw, agenda-setting theory refers to the fact that the media can play a significant role in shaping public opinion in their relative coverage of a given issue over other issues.¹³ For example, beginning with Laura Bush's radio address and the U.S. State Department's report The

⁸ Michael Ryan, "Framing the War Against Terrorism: U.S. Newspaper Editorials and Military Action in Afghanistan," *Gazette: The International Journal for Communication Studies* 66, no. 5, Sage Publications, 2004 367.

⁹ Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4, Dec. 1993, 55, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>

¹⁰ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 322.

¹¹ Roger W. Cobb and Charles D. Elder, "The Politics of Agenda-building: An Alternative Perspective for Modern Democratic Theory," *The Journal of Politics* 33, no. 4, Nov. 1971, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2128415>, 907.

¹² Cobb and Elder, "The Politics of Agenda-building: An Alternative Perspective for Modern Democratic Theory," 904.

¹³ Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no.2, Summer 1972, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2747787>.

Taliban's War Against Women,¹⁴ women's rights in Afghanistan became a global concern and a means of mobilization. However, instead of historical or political anecdotes about Afghan women, media coverage fixated on religious and cultural segments, which according to Lila Abu-Lughod, an ethnographic scholar on Middle Eastern studies, "prevented serious exploration of the roots and nature of human suffering in this part of the world."¹⁵

Agenda-setting is closely related to the concept of gatekeeping where those who have the power to set agendas have the power to control the flow of information. According to Robert Entman, a frame in a news text is an "imprint of power – it registers the identity of the actors or interests that competed to dominate the text."¹⁶ In the West, the subject of Muslim women in the Middle East conjures up images of oppressed women – covered head to toe in burqas, or women suffering from "religious" or Islamist extremism. Such perceptions are further compounded with illustrations like the controversial *Time Magazine* cover depicting an eighteen-year-old Afghan woman who was disfigured by the Taliban in 2009. Critics of the *Time* cover, such as *The New York Times*, called it "emotional blackmail" and even "war porn."¹⁷ Yet, as the previous example shows, there are media outlets that push back against the war on terror metanarrative.

A Postcolonial Critique

In an exploration of the politics behind education in Afghanistan, Nandini Deo notes that the Bush administration rhetoric was "a distant echo of the discourse common to early nineteenth

¹⁴ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "The Taliban's War Against Women."

¹⁵ Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism," *The American Anthropological Association, American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3, Sept. 2002, 784. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3567256>.

¹⁶ Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," 55.

¹⁷ Rod Nordland, "Portrait of Pain Ignites Debate Over Afghan War," *The New York Times*, Aug. 4, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/05/world/asia/05afghan.html>.

century colonists.”¹⁸ Gayatri Spivak, a post-colonial critic, coined the now famous phrase, “white men saving brown women from brown men,”¹⁹ to describe the ideological underpinnings of imperial masculinity and the state. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak argues that in the wake of the Cold War, the American “democratization” mission “carries with it the aura of the civilizing mission of earlier colonialisms,” and that such rhetoric “is now more specifically in terms of gender than anything else.”²⁰

While the protection of women is sometimes articulated overtly as a reason for war, it is more often “somewhat less direct – e.g., we must fight to protect our way of life, our freedoms, our nation from the infidels, our tribe from their tribe, the world from communism, ‘us’ from whomever is defined as ‘them.’”²¹ Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou makes the argument – in his book *A Theory of ISIS: Political Violence and the Global Order* – that the discussion of terrorism is “stuck in a dynamic whereby positions and assumption confine most analysts to Manichean logics of bipolarity; attack and defense, rise and fall, emergence and disappearance, us and them.”²² He attributes the reoccurring “good versus evil” paradigmatic thinking to the “international politicization of expertise around terrorism” that has largely “eras[ed] colonialism from the contemporary international affairs discussion.”²³ Edward Said echoes a similar sentiment in his book *Culture and Imperialism* where he writes that global

¹⁸ Nandini Deo, “The Politics of Education in Afghanistan,” *Pakistan Journal of Women’s Studies* 21, no. 1, 2014, 4.

¹⁹ Rosalind C. Morris, *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections of the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 3.

²⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 223.

²¹ Carol Cohn and Ruth Jacobson, *Women & Wars*, ed. By Carol Cohn (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013), 114.

²² Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, Chapter Title: “Conclusion: Colonialism Boomerang” from book *A Theory of ISIS: Political Violence and the Global Order*, Pluto Press, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1x07z89>. 12.

²³ Ould Mohamedou, Chapter Title: “Conclusion: Colonialism Boomerang.”

thinking tends to reproduce old, superpower, Cold War, ideological, Orientalist paradigms.²⁴

Said argues,

American attitudes towards American ‘greatness,’ to hierarchies of race, to the perils of *other* revolutions (the American revolution being considered unique and somehow repeatable anywhere else in the world) have remained constant, have dictated, have obscured, the realities of empire, while apologists for overseas American interests have insisted on American innocence, doing good, fighting for freedom.²⁵

And according to Mohamedou, this ahistorical analysis prevents social scientists from “grasp[ing] the meaning of what new violence is playing out and indeed how past violence has shaped it.”²⁶ Understanding the rhetorical link between colonialism and its ideological foundation in today’s context raises fundamental questions about whether or not a state can positively influence the status of women even as it engages militarily with its people and as it uses their condition as a means to justify or distract from American aggression.

Feminist Literature on the Portrayal of Afghan Women

Although Laura Bush’s remarks were readily accepted by ‘Western’ feminist groups such as the American Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), the majority of authoritative postcolonial and postmodern feminist scholars interrogate the use of women’s rights rhetoric in the context of a military occupation. This contention alludes to a very relevant point that a monolithic, all-encompassing consensus in the feminist field of research does not exist – similarly to how despite the Western tendency to portray women and more specifically Afghan women as encompassing a singular reality, these women experience very different realities based on their intersectionality. For the purposes of this research, I focus on postmodern and postcolonial

²⁴ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 283.

²⁵ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 8.

²⁶ Ould Mohamedou, Chapter Title: “Conclusion: Colonialism Boomerang.”

feminist scholarship as it directly pertains to many of the binaries that confine American discourses on the War on Terror – civility/barbarity, freedom/oppression, Judeo-Christianity/Islam, progress/tradition, and democracy/tyranny – which are rooted in imperialist, colonial, and Orientalist legacies, where narrative often relies on gendered rhetoric.

Laura Bush’s framing carries significant implications in that it emphasizes some aspects of reality while omitting other parts, which can substantially mislead the public and prevent a systematic analysis of the complex yet interrelated historical and social factors that gave way to Afghan women’s status in 2001 – thus neutering any real ability to formulate policy targeting some of the root causes of their generalized status. Aarya Nijat argues that “[w]omen’s emancipation helped justify a political decision: the military engagement. As a result, the lines between the age-old patriarchal dynamics and the Taliban were blurred.”²⁷ Krista Hunt argues that the United States’ “promotion of women’s participation in peace-building and reconstruction may merely constitute a form of ‘embedded feminism’ that operates to camouflage the real and damaging consequences of larger international processes of empire-building.”²⁸ Ann Russo draws attention to the imperial undertones of the FMF’s campaign as she argues:

While the FMF’s Campaign draws public attention to the discrimination and violence facing Afghan women under the Taliban, its discourse is embedded in an ahistorical and Orientalist framework that assumes the benevolence and superiority of the U.S. in establishing gender equality. Thus, the FMF reproduces an imperial feminism tied to the U.S. State interests in empire building – a feminism that evades accountability for the consequences of U.S. militarism while it establishes its own power and authority in determining the future of Afghanistan.²⁹

²⁷ Aarya Nijat, “The Dilemma of Women and Leadership in Afghanistan: Lessons and Recommendations,” *AREU*, Nov. 2014, <https://areu.org.af/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/1425EThe-Dilemma-of-Women-and-Leadership-in-Afghanistan.pdf>.

²⁸ K. Hunt, *(En)gendering the War on Terror* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 51-72.

²⁹ Ann Russo, “The Feminist Majority Foundation’s Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid: The Intersections of Feminism and Imperialism in the United States,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 18, no. 4, 2006, 557.

In conjunction to deconstructing the FMF's campaign, academics take issue with Laura Bush's instrumentalization of women's rights when discussing the United States' "recent military gains" – i.e. bombing campaign. Saba Gul Khattak takes issue with the U.S. bombing campaign in Afghanistan because the administration's rhetoric of women's liberation occurred simultaneously to the U.S. deployment of "approximately 20 kilograms of high explosive for every man, woman and child in the country."³⁰ She questions the United States' intentions for using women's rights rhetoric since "advocate[ing] bombing them in order to liberate them" is paradoxical and leads to more harm than good. According to the United Nations, "Women and girls suffer disproportionately during and after war, as existing inequalities [are] magnified, and social networks [break] down, making them more vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation."³¹

There seems to be a consensus, however, that calling attention to the Taliban's treatment of women was necessary. Nevertheless, most take issue with the *way* in which that attention is discursively and visually presented to the American public. Furthermore, scholars like Angela Raven-Roberts interrogate the effectiveness of policy and aid programs imported from the outside that single out women's issues as the only means to improve gender equality and life after the Taliban. According to Angela Raven-Roberts, attempts by many international development agencies targeting education and economic opportunities for women have had the undesired effect of Afghan men feeling "resentful and disempowered" leading many to "assert their sense of masculinity through domestic violence or rejoining militant groups" because

³⁰ Saba Gul Khattak, "Afghan Women: Bombed to be Liberated?" *Middle East Report*, no. 222, Spring 2002, 19, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1559266>.

³¹ Under Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations, "Women Suffer Disproportionately During and After War, Security Council Told During Day-Long Debate on Women, Peace and Security," *United Nations*, Oct. 29, 2003, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2003/sc7908.doc.htm>.

similar opportunities have not been allocated for men.³² It is without question that women have suffered disproportionately in relation to Afghan men not only from the Taliban but also due to the country's war-torn past. Yet, it is important to ask these questions because enacting policy to aid women – while certainly a praiseworthy endeavor in itself, runs the risk of inciting unforeseen consequences such as deepening gender divide and hostility in an already tumultuous political and social environment. Perhaps it is no coincidence that in the last decade, we have seen a spike in domestic abuse and “honor killings” against Afghan women³³ – which to this point, the contributing factors for this development remains elusive.

Women's Rights as Ideograph

An ideograph refers to the political use of abstract concepts to cultivate support for a given political position. Rhetorical scholar, Michael McGee coined the term ideograph to describe the use of certain words and phrases *politically* to create or strengthen a particular ideological position. McGee's ideograph definition highlights the cultural underpinnings of ideology as well as the implications for its use;

An ideograph is an ordinary-language term found in political discourse. It is high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal. It warrants the use of power, excuses behavior and belief which might otherwise be perceived as eccentric or anti-social, and guides behavior and belief into channels easily recognized by the community as acceptable and laudable.³⁴

Nadje Al-Ali argues in her book – *What Kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq* – the war on terror metanarrative relies on the public's preexisting cultural stereotypes and

³² Raven-Roberts, *Women & Wars*, ed. By Carol Cohn, 40.

³³ Rashida Manjoo, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Its Causes and Consequences: Mission to Afghanistan,” *United Nations General Assembly*, May 12, 2015, <http://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/-/media/files/un%20women/vaw/country%20report/asia/afghanistan/afghanistan%20srvaw.pdf?vs=2210>.

³⁴ Michael McGee, “The ‘Ideograph:’ A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no 1, 1980, <https://www-tandfonline-com.lib.pepperdine.edu/doi/abs/10.1080/00335638009383499>.

generalizations about Islam and women in Muslim societies.³⁵ One of the most visible examples of this is in the ‘West’s’ fixation on veiling. Leila Ahmed concludes:

As the burka of Afghanistan became a pervasive imagine in the media, so also did the subject of women in Islam, and in particular the ‘oppression of women in Islam,’ emerge as a salient theme in relation to issues of war and the moral rightness of war and even in explanations of why American had been attacked...The replay of this ploy throughout history is all too familiar.

Through the war on terror meta-frame, the burka evolves into an ideograph as each account of an Afghan woman and its fixation on veiling becomes more abstract and far-removed from the historical, religious, and personal reasons a Muslim woman chooses to veil or not to veil in Afghanistan. Polly Toynbee, a British report writes that “for the west, the burka was the easy symbol of Taliban oppression, a shorthand moral justification for liberating Afghanistan.”³⁶ Just one day before Laura Bush made her remarks on the successful “liberation” of Afghan women by the U.S. military, Chris Stephen – a reporter based in Kabul for the London *Observer* writes, “Foreign newspaper photographers, under pressure to produce images of the city's rejection of the Taliban, can be seen each day persuading a few women to remove these garments. What the photos do not show is the women putting them back on-again moments later.”³⁷ The media are not the only actor culpable in this limiting portrayal. For example, the U.S. State Department report on *The Taliban’s War Against Women* resorts to these same cultural arguments – describing women “donning the tent-like burqa” *several* times in making a de-facto moral case against the Taliban. Although the Taliban made the religious garment compulsory, Stephen calls

³⁵ Nadjie Al-Ali, *What Kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

³⁶ Polly Toynbee, “Was it Worth it, *The Guardian*, Nov. 12, 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/nov/13/afghanistan.comment>.

³⁷ Chris Stephen, “The First Rush of Freedom,” *The Observer*, Nov. 17, 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/nov/18/afghanistan.terrorism3>.

attention to this extremely superficial marker for success – whether or not Afghan women throw off their hijab as a tangible sign of liberation.

Nadje Al-Ali demonstrates that the combination of the <women and children> and <rights> ideograph in the context of the war on terror has far reaching consequences in its ability to expand the scope of war. Nadje Al-Ali finds that the Bush administration applied its earlier discourse on Afghan women (war on terror as a “fight for the rights and dignity of women”) to Iraqi women leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. She argues:

Military intervention cannot liberate women because it is embedded within a set of assumptions, beliefs, and social relations that reinforce and reproduce gender inequality, as well as other social inequalities within and across nation-states. Military intervention depends upon a belief in the legitimacy of armed violence in resolving political problems, which in turn depends upon our adherence to particular ideas about what it means to be a man or women.³⁸

Tasha N. Dubriwny supports Nadje Al-Ali’s conclusion in her examination of the <women and children> ideograph. Dubriwny writes that these gender norms play out both *rhetorically* via first-lady “Laura Bush’s unique blend of maternal and liberal feminism” via her use of <women and children> and <rights> and *materially* in the way U.S. aid to Afghanistan is structured.³⁹ According to Dubriwny’s analysis, U.S. aid programs in Afghanistan reinforce hegemonic gender ideologies because these programs “encourage women to support their families” which “reify the idea that women’s political space is somehow different than men’s and, for women in Afghanistan, this confirms the notion that women’s political and non-political work must be oriented around ‘home and hearth’ issues such as education and health care.”⁴⁰ Further, this focus on education and health care has material implications. According to the Afghanistan Research and Evaluations Unit (AREU) speaking on the status of international interventions and

³⁸ Nadje Al-Ali, *What Kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq*, 60.

³⁹ Tasha N. Dubriwny, “First Ladies and Feminism: Laura Bush as Advocate for Women’s and Children’s Rights,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 28, no. 1, Spring 2005, 109.

⁴⁰ Dubriwny, “First Ladies and Feminism: Laura Bush as Advocate for Women’s and Children’s Rights,” 109.

U.S. aid programs specifically, the unit finds that “there is a tendency to focus on ‘easy fixes’ and ‘concrete outcomes,’ such as schools or other infrastructure and to avoid cultural aspects of social change processes that challenge traditions and require attitudinal shifts.”⁴¹

Dana L. Cloud concludes that Bush’s clash of civilizations rhetoric – which often relies on age-old Orientalist-themes of rescue and benevolence – has significantly obscured hermeneutical examinations into the “underlying truths veiled by a misleading ideological common sense.”⁴² According to Cloud, the widely circulated images of the indefensible, impoverished Afghan woman “established binary oppositions between self and Other, located U.S. viewers in positions of paternalistic gazing, and offered images of a shining modernity that justified U.S. intervention there.”⁴³ The implication being that “this discourse also rendered opaque the actual motives for the war [expansion] and, thus, disabled real public deliberation over its course.”⁴⁴ In *Image Politics*, Dr. Kevin DeLuca argues that “the increasing saturation of public discourse with mediated images compels the Left to engage and employ the strategies of visual rhetoric.”⁴⁵

Conclusions

McLaughlin argues that George W. Bush continued an old Cold War division of the world in his framing of the new “war on terror” where “every nation in every region” is either

⁴¹ Esser, Egge, Winterbotham and Kantor, “Women’s Rights, Gender Equality, and Transition: Securing Gains, Moving Forward,” 14.

⁴² Dana L. 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, Aug. 2004, 287, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0033563042000270726>.

⁴³ Cloud, “To Veil the Threat of Terror,” 299.

⁴⁴ Cloud, “To Veil the Threat of Terror,” 299.

⁴⁵ Kevin DeLuca, *Image Politics*, (New York: Guilford, 1999), 17.

with us or with the terrorists.⁴⁶ While it is easy to dismiss such radical political rhetoric in hindsight, this “carefully calibrated propaganda campaign” has massive implications, which McLaughlin indicates as first, an uncritical western corporate media and second, the instrumentalization of Bush’s abstract war on terror rhetoric by other states to “legitimate their use of overwhelming force against internal threats or nationalist insurgencies (Russia in Chechnya or Israel in the Occupied Territories and Gaza, for example).”⁴⁷ Nadjé Al-Ali makes a compelling yet interrelated point. She notices that the U.S. administration reproduced its rhetoric of ‘freeing’ Afghan women to Iraqi women leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Nadjé Al-Ali concludes: “By highlighting the plight of female victims in faraway lands, U.S. officials not only provided a pretext for military invasion but also restored the image of the United States as the strong hero rather than the victim of terrorist attacks. This was an important message to send its enemies as well as its allies.”⁴⁸

Research Method

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is the ideal framework to examine politized representations of Afghan women because it encourages the questioning of power dynamics, knowledge production, and strict binary thinking. “Framework analysis” refers to the systematic examination of key words, phrases, and/or themes within a given action or situation by analyzing

⁴⁶ Greg McLaughlin, “Chapter Title: Reporting the ‘War on Terror’ and the Return of the Evil Empire” from the book *The War Correspondent*, Pluto Press, 2016, 191. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt19qgf0x.13>.

⁴⁷ McLaughlin, “Chapter Title: Reporting the ‘War on Terror’ and the Return of the Evil Empire,” 192.

⁴⁸ Al-Ali, *What Kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq*, 83.

how such experiences are framed.⁴⁹ According to Entman, Tuchman, and Verloo, a policy frame is “an organizing principle that transforms fragmentary or incidental information into a structured and meaningful policy problem, in which a solution is implicitly or explicitly enclosed.”⁵⁰ Specifically, policy frames are specific constructions which give meaning to reality, while also shaping the public’s understanding of reality.”⁵¹

I conduct a comparative, critical discourse analysis (CDA) on twenty speeches from George W. Bush from 2001 to 2003. Then I complete a CDA on the U.S. State Department report concerning Afghan women – *The Taliban’s War Against Women*. Next, I conduct a CDA of three-hundred-and-sixty-five news articles from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* about “Afghan women” using the LexisNexis database. I then conduct a CDA of U.S. policy and aid programs for Afghan women – the two most important documents being the “Afghan Women & Children Relief Act of 2001” and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) program Promote – which the agency heralds as the largest women’s empowerment aid program. I limit the scope of my CDA to three years – September 11, 2001 to December 8, 2003. Although I limit the scope of my research to three years, in my analysis of the *NYT* and the *Post*, I scan through articles beginning in 1980 and ending to the present day to serve as an anecdotal context in my conclusion.

⁴⁹ Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University, 1974), xvi.

⁵⁰ Mieke Verloo, “Mainstreaming Gender Equality in Europe. A Critical Frame Analysis Approach,” *The Greek Review of Social Research* 117, 2005, 20, <http://dx.doi.org/10.12681/grsr.9555>.

⁵¹ Verloo, “Mainstreaming Gender Equality in Europe. A Critical Frame Analysis Approach,” 20.

Data/Findings

Fig. 1 –Frames Within the War on Terror Metanarrative

	Good vs. Evil	Protector vs. Protected	Freedom vs. Tyranny	Civilization vs. Barbarism
President George W. Bush Speeches (2001-2003)	Struggle of good and evil	Heroism, victimization, Taliban responsible	Fight for freedom against tyranny	Western civilization against barbarism
Media <i>The New York Times & The Washington Post</i> (2001-2003)	----	Heroism, victimization	----	Sensationalism of veiling
State Dept. <i>Taliban's War Against Women</i> 2001	Good versus evil	Heroism, victimization, Taliban responsible	Fight for freedom against tyranny	Burqa as a symbol of Taliban oppression
Congress "Afghan Women & Children Relief Act of 2001" 2001	----	Taliban responsible	----	----
USAID Promote 2015-2020 (5 year-long program)	----	Benevolence of U.S., progress, leadership	Democracy = freedom	----

Although there is a multitude of subframes within the war on terror metanarrative, I focus primarily on the ‘good versus evil,’ ‘the protector and protected,’ ‘freedom versus tyranny’ and ‘civilization versus barbarianism’ frames – which is indicated along the top row in the chart above (fig. 1). Beneath each frame, I denote the common themes within each source (i.e. president, media, state department, congress, and USAID) to show how each source either fulfills, rejects, changes and/or morphs the existing frame. I found that the administration emphasized the heroism of U.S. and the neediness/victimization of Afghan women. There was little to no nuance in their portrayal, and portrayed Taliban as solely responsible for their current situation with no mentioning of Northern Alliance’s human rights violations or the role that the U.S. previously played in the Soviet-Afghan war. In regard to the State Department, as expected, it mirrored many of the same frames as the president. Interestingly, I found that the press (*Times*

and *Post*) rejects the president's narrative concerning the morals of war; yet, they reinforce much of Bush's clash of civilization rhetoric via their sensationalism of veiling.

U.S. Administration as the Architect of the "War on Terror" Metanarrative

The phrase "war on terror" was first used by George W. Bush in an address to Congress on September 20, 2001, and since then, the term has entered into common global lexicon. As Americans grasp the magnitude of 9/11 and try to understand how and why the U.S. was attacked, on September 11, from the Oval Office in Bush's Address to the Nation, he indicated that "America was targeted for attack because we are the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining."⁵² Unfortunately, while Bush's narrative is certainly easy to understand, it is nearly devoid of all relevant historical information. There is no mention of the U.S.'s previous role in the Soviet-Afghan War or even the fact that Ronald Reagan once heralded the Taliban as "freedom fighters."

As early as September 20, George W. Bush calls attention to the status of Afghan women in his Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress. He calls attention to the fact that women are unable to attend school under Taliban rule, he then exclaims – "This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is a fight of all who believe in progress, pluralism, tolerance and freedom... The civilized world is rallying to America's side."⁵³ In the same speech, Bush gives a list of demands to the Taliban government and adds that "these demands are not open to negotiation or discussion. The Taliban must act, and act immediately. They will

⁵² George W. Bush, "Address to Nation on the September 11 Attacks," (speech, Washington D.C., Sept. 11, 2001), Selected Speeches of President George W. Bush 2001-2008, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf.

⁵³ George W. Bush, "Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress," (speech, Washington D.C., Sept. 20, 2001) Selected Speeches of President George W. Bush 2001-2008, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf.

hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate.”⁵⁴ In this instance, Bush significantly (if not indefinitely) closes any diplomatic, non-militaristic intervention into Afghanistan – thus, from the onset of the “war on terror” metanarrative, military solutions are codified as the best and only possible course of action – *even* in the case of humanitarian goals (i.e. “liberating” Afghan women). In Bush’s Address to the Nation on Operations in Afghanistan on October of 2001, he states – “The oppressed people of Afghanistan will know the generosity of America and our allies. As we strike military targets, we’ll also drop food, medicine and supplies to the starving and suffering men and women and children of Afghanistan. The United States of America is a friend to the Afghan people...”⁵⁵ November 8, 2001, during an Address to the Nation at the World Congress Center in Georgia, president George W. Bush made the following statement with regard to the war on terrorism:

This new enemy seeks to destroy our freedom and impose its views. We value life; the terrorists ruthlessly destroy it. We value education; the terrorists do not believe women should be educated or should have health care or should leave their homes. We value the right to speak our minds; for the terrorists, free expression can be grounds for execution. We respect people of all faiths and welcome the free practice of religion; our enemy wants to dictate how to think and how to worship even to their fellow Muslims. [...] We wage a war to save civilization. We did not seek it, but we might fight it – and we will prevail.⁵⁶

Bush’s discourse regarding the war as a clash of civilizations is derivative of Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” hypothesis, which argues that in the post-Cold War world, conflict will be neither ideological nor economic but cultural.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ George W. Bush, “Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress.”

⁵⁵ George W. Bush, “Address to the Nation on Operations in Afghanistan,” (speech, Washington D.C., October 7, 2001), Selected Speeches of President George W. Bush 2001-2008, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf.

⁵⁶ George W. Bush, “President Discusses War on Terrorism,” (speech, Atlanta, Nov. 8, 2001), The White House Archives, <https://georgewbushwhitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011108-13.html>.

⁵⁷ Tanja Collet, “Civilization and Civilized in Post-9/11 U.S. Presidential Speeches,” *Discourse & Society* 20, no 4, 456.

This cultural framework lays a moral foundation against the Other's rejection of universal values. Two months later, Bush declared that "there is a great divide in our time – not between religion or cultures, but between *civilization* and barbarism."⁵⁸ Although Bush explicitly denies resorting to cultural dualisms, the delineation between "civilization and barbarism" is implicitly a cultural statement where the more "civilized" state intervenes (typically militarily) on behalf of the "barbaric" or "backwards" state to "save" them – a theme reminiscent of colonization. I find that the administration emphasized the heroism of U.S. and the neediness/victimization of Afghan women. There was little to no nuance in their portrayal, and they portrayed Taliban as solely responsible for their current situation with no mentioning of Northern Alliance's human rights violations or the role of that the U.S. previously played in the Soviet-Afghan war.

The New York Times and Washington Post – Sources of Dissent?

Just six days prior to Laura Bush's radio address in an article in the Sunday-edition of *The Washington Post*, Nafisa Hoodbhoy, writes:

What's more, as U.S. bombs hit civilians, the Pashtuns are becoming even more radicalized. The United States has had little success in wooing moderate Pashtuns away from the Taliban – a move that the administration recognizes is necessary not only to win the current war but because Afghanistan's future stability depends upon cooperation among tribal factions. As the U.S. bombing continues, thousands of armed Pashtun tribesmen are gathering on the Pakistan-Afghan border to fight alongside the Taliban. Political analysts I have spoken with in Pakistan predict that even if the Taliban is routed, it will likely withdraw into the hills and fight the new government. Moreover, the Northern Alliance could plunge into internecine strife. So, although there is no doubt in my mind that women will fare somewhat better if the Taliban is overthrown, I wonder what comes next. Unless there is a means of ensuring durable peace, women's rights do not have a fighting chance in Afghanistan.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ George W. Bush, "We're Fighting to Win – And Win We Will," (speech, *USS Enterprise* Norfolk, Dec. 7, 2001), White House Archives, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/12/20011207.html>.

⁵⁹ Nafisa Hoodbhoy, "A Future Veiled in False Hopes," *The Washington Post*, Nov. 11, 2001, <https://advance-lexis-com.lib.pepperdine.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:44DH-0220-010F-93J9-00000-00&context=1516831>.

The *New York Times* echoed a similar sentiment – just one day before Laura Bush’s radio address – in their interrogation of the Northern Alliance’s commitment to women’s equality. Lashawn Jefferson writes, “As a result, after the war, they [women] could end up only marginally better off than they were under Taliban rule.”⁶⁰ Six months after 9/11, the Pew Research Center conducted a poll measuring public opinion on matters related to the war on terrorism, and it found that although “9/11 had not caused the public to abandon its long-standing criticisms of government... the president is still rated positively by nearly eight-in-ten Americans and gets an extraordinary 63% approval mark among Democrats in Pew’s February survey.”⁶¹ I mention Pew’s findings because it encapsulates my overall findings: Although the *Post* and *Times* interrogate Bush’s narrative regarding warfare capacity to ‘liberate’ Afghan women, both media outlets sensationalize the Muslim practice of veiling – which implicitly reinforces many of President Bush’s war on terror themes (i.e. civility/barbarity, freedom/oppression, Judaea-Christianity/Islam, progress/tradition).

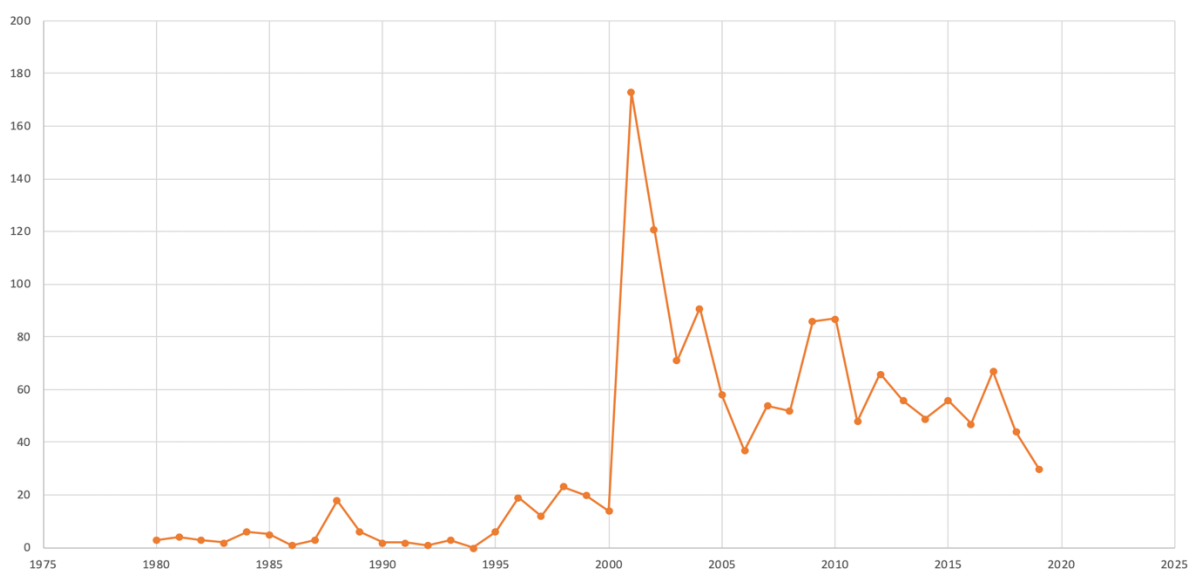
To answer my research question, I singled out articles about “Afghan women” from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* from 2001 to 2003 for my CDA using the LexisNexis database. However, because the declining status of Afghan women dates back to the 1980s, I scanned through the *Times* and *Post* articles beginning in the 1980s to understand the extent to which these outlets reported on women during the Soviet-Afghan War leading up to the Taliban’s takeover of the Afghan government. The figure below (fig.2) illustrates the volume of news reports concerning Afghan women from the *Post* and *Times* ranging from the 1980s to the

⁶⁰ Lashawn Jefferson, “Out Go the Taliban, but Will Afghan Women Be Excluded Again?” *The New York Times*, Nov. 16, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/16/opinion/IHT-out-go-the-taliban-but-will-afghan-women-be-Excluded-again.html>.

⁶¹ Pew Research Center, “Public Opinion Six Months Later: Nationhood Internationalism Lifted,” March 7, 2002, <https://www.people-press.org/2002/03/07/public-opinion-six-months-later/>.

present day, and it shows an obvious spike in media coverage centered on the issue of Afghan women. This surge in media attention indicates the role that the U.S. administration plays in agenda-setting.

Fig. 2 – Volume of News Reports from The New York Times & Washington Post



Data collected from LexisNexis

The most important finding from my CDA of *Post* and *Times* articles from 2001 to 2003 is that the majority of articles did *not* reinforce Bush’s protector/the protected trope, nor did they accept the notion that the Taliban were solely responsible for humanitarian abuses. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the *Times* and *Post* exhibited mostly neutral reporting of information coming from the State Department and the Bush administration with the caveat that both added relevant information absent from the war on terror narrative. For example, after Laura Bush’s radio address, *The New York Times* report gave a mostly objective reporting of the facts (i.e. what Laura Bush explicitly spoke about); however, at the end of the report, it states: “Neither the first lady nor the State Department report mentioned that, to many Westerners, some

Muslim attitudes toward women seem chauvinistic and out of place. And Amnesty International issued a statement today asserting that the Northern Alliance have also oppressed women and should not be allowed to dictate their place in a new Afghan society.”⁶²

I noticed that as the war progressed, the articles progressively began to interrogate the instrumentalization of women’s rights rhetoric in Afghanistan by transitioning away from complete neutrality and taking a more critical position. For example, in 2002, *The Washington Post* wrote, “Despite rosy news reports, some forms of discrimination have even worsened for women since the fall of the Taliban.”⁶³ Although the *Times* and *Post* began to challenge the morality of the war on terror – i.e. good versus evil, the protector (U.S) and the protected (women) trope, I found many reports built on the “Western” sensationalism on veiling and the burqa. For example, in an article titled “Afghan Women Discard Veils to Discuss Future” from *The Washington Post*, editors write that “women draped their blue burqas, or head-to-toe veils, over the backs of their chairs and sat in simple black or white scarves. Meanwhile, on the streets of Kandahar, not a single Afghan woman could be seen moving about without the billowing burqa.”⁶⁴ While their account of the loya jirga gathering may be completely true and objective, the title of the article itself implies that once women discard veils – a symbol of oppression – then they can look onward to a better, more modern future.

In regard to the subject of veiling, when I examined articles from the *Post* and the *Times* on the subject of Afghan women in the 1980s and apart from their reporting, I found that

⁶² David Stout, “A Nation Challenged: The First Lady; Mrs. Bush Cites Women’s Plight Under Taliban,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 18, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/18/us/a-nation-challenged-the-first-lady-mrs-bush-cites-women-s-plight-under-taliban.html>.

⁶³ Belquis Ahmadi, “Reality Gap in Afghanistan; Despite rosy reports, women's rights remain wishful thinking,” *The Washington Post*, July 8, 2002, <https://advance-lexis-com.lib.pepperdine.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:467G-0C00-010F-913F-00000-00&context=1516831>.

⁶⁴ Associated Press, “Afghan Women Discard Veils to Discuss Future,” *The Washington Post*, March 17, 2002, <https://advance-lexis-com.lib.pepperdine.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:45CC-92K0-010F-92SN-00000-00&context=1516831>.

discourse on Afghan women veiling within the war on terror metanarrative is eerily similar to that of the Soviet Union's symbolic use of the veil as a marker for success in the Soviet-Afghan War. In 1989, *The New York Times* wrote, "Some Western correspondents, unfamiliar with the Afghanistan of pre-invasion days, believe the Soviet claim to have removed the restriction on a view of a female face. Veiling was made optional in 1953, and the number of traditional women's garments on the streets of Kabul diminished steadily until the Soviet invasion."⁶⁵ Both newspapers reject ahistorical accounts of Afghan women both during the Soviet-Afghan War and the war on terror. However, in my CDA I found that both newspapers persisted on using images of the veil or burka in their representations of nearly all Afghan women, and I find these portrayals to be disadvantageous since many of the articles that fixate on the religious garment do not focus on the women themselves; rather, it sensationalizes the images to the extent that Afghan women become Other. So, although these outlets reframe much of the administration's ahistorical analysis on women's rights in Afghanistan, headlines like the *Times*' "Lifting the Veil" or the *Post*'s "Afghan Women Discard Veils to Discuss Future" serve to reinforce themes of civility/barbarity and freedom/oppression in the war on terror.

State Department

In a report on the "Taliban's War Against Women," the U.S. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor explains the importance of liberating Afghan women in this fight against terrorism. Unlike many reductionist media reports that offer an extremely limited perspective on the history of Afghan women, the report does acknowledge the fluidity of

⁶⁵ "Afghanistan Lifted the Veil Decades Ago," *The New York Times*, May 22, 1989, <https://advance-lexis-com.lib.pepperdine.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3SJB-4SN0-002S-X34P-00000-00&context=1516831>.

women's rights over time in Afghanistan by referencing the fact that many women constitutionally had rights prior to "Western" influence. Yet, the report also resorts to cultural arguments *several* times in making a case against the Taliban. The State report states:

In urban areas, the Taliban brutally enforced a dress code that required women to be covered under a burqa -- a voluminous, tent-like full-body outer garment that covers them from head to toe. One Anglo-Afghan journalist reported that the burqa's veil is so thick that the wearer finds it difficult to breathe; the small mesh panel permitted for seeing allows such limited vision that even crossing the street safely is difficult.⁶⁶

The report then indicates that "While the burqa existed prior to the Taliban, its use was not required. As elsewhere in the Muslim world and the United States, women chose to use the burqa as a matter of individual religious or personal preference."⁶⁷ The report follows its depiction of burqas as a "voluminous, tent-like" garment, with a very nuanced portrayal in acknowledging the fact that many women freely choose to wear it for reasons other than compulsory rules.

However, the report ultimately does not offer a balanced assessment of women's status in Afghanistan. The report goes on to state:

The burqa is not only a physical and psychological burden on some Afghan women, it is a significant economic burden as well. Many women cannot afford the cost of one. In some cases, whole neighborhoods share a single garment, and women must wait days for their turn to go out. For disabled women who need a prosthesis or other aid to walk, the required wearing of the burqa makes them virtually homebound if they cannot get the burqa over the prosthesis or other aid or use the device effectively when wearing the burqa. Restrictions on clothing are matched with other limitations on personal adornment. Makeup and nail polish were prohibited. White socks were also prohibited, as were shoes that make noise as it had been deemed that women should walk silently.⁶⁸

While I do not propound to comprehend anything pertaining to women's hardships in Afghanistan, I take liberty in assuming that the freedom to wear nail polish and makeup ranks extremely low on the hierarchy of urban and rural women's desires for a better society. The implication, however, is that the way in which the plight of Afghan women is described seems to

⁶⁶ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "Report on the Taliban's War Against Women."

⁶⁷ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "Report on the Taliban's War Against Women."

⁶⁸ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "Report on the Taliban's War Against Women."

be directed towards “Western” women. Thus, the humanitarian framework begins to fall apart once the report is seen through a political lens.

Congress

On November 15, 2001, the House introduced legislation detailing the status of Afghan women and children while also authorizing the President to determine – however he sees fit – how the U.S. will provide education and health care assistance for women and children in Afghanistan and as refugees in neighboring countries. On November 28, the bill passed Congress as the “Afghan Women and Children Relief Act of 2001.”⁶⁹ The Act’s findings – Section 2 number 1 (sec. 2, no. 1) – first details the Taliban’s abuse of women in Afghanistan, and then it identifies a range of statistics that demonstrate its need for humanitarian aid – such as the country’s high infant mortality rate, its low access to drinking water and Afghanistan’s high malnutrition rate for children (sec. 2, no. 2-7). Yet, there is no discussion of any other factors leading to their present-day situation other than that of Taliban rule. The remaining findings of the bill make a pre- and post-Taliban distinction to indicate that the degradation of women’s status is not due to the country’s war torn past – for instance during the Soviet-Afghan War where the U.S. funded the mujahedin (which later evolved into the present-day Taliban government) via the Cold War framework; rather, blame is solely attributed to the Taliban. The Act states,

Before the Taliban took control of Kabul, schools were coeducational, with women accounting for 70 percent of the teaching force. Women represented about 50 percent of the civil service corps, and 40 percent of the city’s physicians were women. Today, the Taliban prohibits women from working as teachers, doctors, and in any other occupation.... Of the many tens of thousands of war widows in Afghanistan, many are

⁶⁹ 107th Congress of the United States of America, “Afghan Women and Children Relief Act of 2001,” <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/107/s1573/text>.

forced to beg for food and to sell their possessions because they are not allowed to work.⁷⁰

The Act highlights a very real problem for women in Afghanistan given its past wartime footing – war widowhood; however, it excludes any specific mentioning of past wars. It also vaguely refers to a past where women had rights to contrast the present Taliban rule; however, it does not specify whether or not the freedoms that Afghan women experienced was due to Soviet rule in the 1980s or Afghan self-rule in the 1920s. For those unfamiliar with Afghanistan’s past, it is worth noting that the year Afghanistan gained its independence from Britain in 1919, women were given the right to vote, which was a year before women in the United States were eligible to vote.⁷¹ And the very first Afghan constitution in 1923 guaranteed equal rights for men and women, abolished slavery and forced labor, created a legislature and guaranteed secular education to both sexes.⁷² These facts illustrate the power in framing where some parts of reality are emphasized while other parts are downplayed or even omitted.

U.S. AID

The United States has been explicit in its focus on the plight of Afghan women, elucidating this fact with its (usually gendered) humanitarian aid – with its most notable program, Promote, which is heralded as the single largest aid program designed specifically for “women empowerment.” The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) statement on U.S. involvement states,

The U.S. government and international donors have considered the investment in Afghan women to be a top priority of foreign assistance goals for the past 15 years. A focus on opportunities for women has been mainstreamed across the extensive USAID portfolio in

⁷⁰ 107th Congress of the United States of America, “Afghan Women and Children Relief Act of 2001.”

⁷¹ Amnesty International UK, “Women’s Rights in Afghanistan,” Nov. 25, 2014, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/womens-rights-afghanistan-history>.

⁷² PBS, “Timeline of Women’s Rights in Afghanistan,” Oct. 25, 2011, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/women-war-and-peace/uncategorized/timeline-of-womens-rights-in-afghanistan/>.

Afghanistan. Activities in health, education, economic growth, agriculture and democracy and governance have always addressed women and continue to do so.⁷³

Although the CDA approach worked great for analyzing discourse from the president, media, state department reports, and policy documents, I ran into some difficulty with attempting to analyze USAID program for Afghan women's empowerment, Promote, mostly because there was surprisingly little material to examine that *specifically* addresses *how* the program is achieving its objective of leadership development, civil service training, economic empowerment and civil society advocacy.⁷⁴ Despite this missing element, the USAID claims that Promote has "already assisted over 50,000 young women across the country."⁷⁵ I then examined the Program's "success stories" to try to find any mentioning of *specific* measures that the agency is taking for women's promotion. There is a total of forty-six success stories listed on the Promote's website. Again, there is no mentioning of *how* the program is helping women; rather, each "success story" has a similar structure where there is first a given problem statement (i.e. health issues, air and water pollution), then a female proponent of the USAID gives a personal anecdote, and finally the story ends with a brief summary of how one of USAID's mechanisms (women in government, women's leadership development, women in the economy, and/or education) is supporting the resolution to the given problem. Since I did not have very much content from the USAID on its Promote project to work with in my CDA, I examined the congressional-appointed General of Afghanistan Reconstruction's report on Promote. In 2018, the program came under scrutiny when John L. Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, said, "We cannot find any good data that they [are] helping any women."⁷⁶

⁷³ USAID, "Promote," February 19, 2019, <https://www.usaid.gov/afghanistan/promote/>.

⁷⁴ USAID, "Welcome to USAID Promote," <https://www.promoteafghanwomen.org/en>.

⁷⁵ USAID, "Welcome to USAID Promote," <https://www.promoteafghanwomen.org/en>.

⁷⁶ Rod Nordland, "U.S. Aid Program Vowed to Help 75,000 Afghan Women. Watchdog Says It's a Flop," *The New York Times*, Sept. 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/13/world/asia/afghanistan-women-usaid.html>.

Discussion

Aside from the recent USAID scrutiny, a fundamental question is raised when one notices the complete absence of media attention and aid to help Afghan men impacted by the Taliban's *interpretation of Sharia law*. The Taliban's abuses were not limited to women; rather, the group "also controlled men, enforcing some restrictions on men's own movements. As well as on what they could wear, the length of their hair, leisure activities, music, and dancing."⁷⁷ Yet, despite this fact, most (if not all) international development agencies have focused on combatting gender inequality with positive discrimination – i.e. creating gender-specific programs (for women) in Afghanistan. This asymmetrical economic and political aid raises a fundamental question – If the U.S. media focused on the Afghan men's suffering in addition to its coverage of Afghan women, would the bipartisan public support for a humanitarian-oriented (*military*) occupation resonate as well as it did to garner American support for the reconstruction in Afghanistan?

I hypothesize that the answer would be no – or at least, that it would resonate to a lesser degree and or mobilize bipartisan support with a smaller effect because the power in framing lies in its ability to build on society's preexisting beliefs. Susan M. Akram, finds that ahistorical and demonized representations of Muslims in the twenty-first century did not begin with the 9/11 attacks; rather, "It can be traced to deliberate mythmaking by film and media stereotyping as part of conscious strategy of 'experts' and polemicists on the Middle East, the selling of a foreign policy agenda by US government officials and groups seeking to affect that agenda, and a public susceptible to images identifying the unwelcome 'other' in its midst."⁷⁸ The image of the women

⁷⁷ Angela Raven-Roberts, *Women & Wars*, ed. By Carol Cohn, 40.

⁷⁸ Susan M. Akram, "The Aftermath of September 11, 2001: The Targeting of Arabs and Muslims in America," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 24, 2002, 61.

in the “iron-clad burqa” serves as an easily understood theme in relation to issues concerning the war on terror.

Although the Taliban were notorious for their human rights abuses, especially against women and young girls, their violence and injustices did not enter mainstream media until after 9/11, despite the fact that the *Times* and *Post* as well as local Afghan-based women’s rights groups – such as the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), called attention to the fact that Afghan women’s rights began to rapidly decline when the Taliban came to power in the 1990s. For example, in the mid-nineties, *Times*’ headlines read “Refugee Afghan Women Need Help of Women,” “Women Being Forced from U.N. Workplaces in Afghanistan,” and “Beyond the Rosy Lenses of ‘Bridges;” and in each narrative, editors call attention to the humanitarian crisis (which disproportionately impacts women) in Afghanistan resulting from the power vacuum left by the Soviet and U.S. withdrawal. In conjunction to this peripheral media attention, beginning in the late-1970s, the RAWA organization has campaigned for peace, freedom, democracy and women’s rights in Afghanistan. Although I did not conduct a CDA on non-government organizations (NGOs), through the course of my research, I found that despite the RAWA’s alliance with many U.S. values, the USAID program Promote did not list the organization as an ally. After further examination, I hypothesize that one reason for this has to do with RAWA’s condemnation of attempts to ‘liberate’ women using military means – “Wars Are Not Fought to Liberate Women.”⁷⁹

A frame exerts undeniable power in influencing people’s minds especially if the discourse structure confirms or reproduces society’s preexisting beliefs about the world. In this study, the concept of framing – critical discourse analysis (CDA) – directs our attention to the

⁷⁹ Peter Hart, “Wars are Not Fought to Liberate Women,” *RAWA News*, July 27, 2017, <http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2017/07/27/wars-are-not-fought-to-liberate-women.html>.

details of just how a communicated text can exert its power, and if educated to challenge a dominant frame, one might be better equipped to challenge monolithic portrayals of a given Othered group and consider alternatives to the war paradigm – where humanitarian relief (i.e. the woman “liberation” campaign) and military bombing campaign are a mutually exclusive endeavor.

Conclusions

How can we change our conception of state-rebuilding and humanitarian aid when it becomes inexorably connected with military engagement? As the war in Afghanistan stretches into seventeen-year anniversary, Brown University’s “Cost of War” study concerning the war on terror demonstrates that U.S. media’s positive portrayal of the war has real world consequences. According to the study,

Over 480,000 people have died due to direct war violence, including armed forces on all sides of the conflicts, contractors, civilians, journalists, and humanitarian workers. Over 6,950 US soldiers have died in the wars. US government funding of reconstruction efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan has totaled over \$170 billion. Most of those funds have gone towards arming security forces in both countries. Much of the money allocated to humanitarian relief and rebuilding civil society has been lost to fraud, waste, and abuse. Both Iraq and Afghanistan continue to rank extremely low in global studies of political freedom. Women in Iraq and Afghanistan are excluded from political power and experience high rates of unemployment and war widowhood. Compelling alternatives to war were scarcely considered in the aftermath of 9/11 or in the discussion about war against Iraq. Some of those alternatives are still available to the US.⁸⁰

A frame exerts undeniable power in influencing people’s minds especially if the discourse structure confirms or reproduces society’s preexisting beliefs about the world. In this study, the concept of framing – critical discourse analysis (CDA) – directs our attention to the details of

⁸⁰ Watson Institute International & Public Affairs, “Costs of War,” *Brown University*, 2018, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/summary>.

just how a communicated text can exert its power, and if educated to challenge a dominant frame, one might be better equipped to challenge monolithic portrayals of a given Othered group and consider alternatives to the war paradigm – where humanitarian relief (i.e. the woman “liberation” campaign) and military bombing campaign are a mutually exclusive endeavor.

Perhaps intervention on the ground of a humanitarian crisis was an incentive for getting the Left onboard a continued U.S. military presence in Afghanistan – especially considering Clinton’s blunder in the Rwandan Genocide and the Kosovo conflict. Or, perhaps the Bush administration simply coalesced existing media attention that was covering the issue of Afghan women’s deteriorating rights under the Taliban with his new war on terror metanarrative to garner bipartisan support. The invocation of women’s rights rhetoric might have merely been just one way which the U.S. reinforced its international image as it continues fighting in Afghanistan, more than a decade after the 9/11 terror attacks. Or maybe calling the war on terrorism a “fight for the rights and dignity of women” gives the administration a tangible means of measuring its relative success in fighting terrorism – which according to a recently published *The New York Times* article – “How the U.S. Government Misleads the Public on Afghanistan,” the U.S. distorts data for Afghanistan’s maternal mortality rate, and it is a “blatant example” of American officials exaggerating their “success” in their reconstruction efforts.⁸¹

Deconstructing the rhetoric on the war on terror as a fight for the rights and dignity of women is important because this is still an issue today. After more than seventeen-years of American military engagement with the Taliban, the U.S. is currently seeking a diplomatic avenue out. Just nine days after 9/11, Bush stated that the Taliban were beyond negotiating with;

⁸¹ Rod Nordland, Ash Ngu and Fahim Abed, “How the U.S. Government Misleads the Public on Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/09/08/world/asia/us-misleads-on-afghanistan.html>.

yet, today American and Taliban negotiators are having talks in Doha, Qatar to reach an agreement on U.S. troop withdrawal and on security measures to prevent any future terrorist attack. One key element absent from negotiations is the status of Afghan women. Susan Chira – a senior correspondent and editor on gender issues for *The New York Times* writes that although the liberation of Afghan women “was once a prominent and bipartisan issue;” yet, “nearly two decades later, Afghan women are all but invisible to an American public thoroughly weary of the war.”⁸²

⁸² Susan Chira, “Women Here Are Very, Very Worried,” *The New York Times*, March 22, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/22/sunday-review/women-afghanistan-taliban.html>.

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