11 September and the Aftermath

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Three days after the horrifying events of 11 September, Joel Rogers wrote in *The Nation* that an establishment consensus had already formed regarding the task at hand “to destroy, by root and branch, the terrorist infrastructure that platformed this attack.” The establishment, in short, knew who the enemy was and what to do about it.¹ The issue goes much deeper than this, however. Events like those of 11 September appear to confirm establishment accounts of world politics. Only recently, George W. Bush had some work to do to convince allies—and others—that National Missile Defense (NMD) was a reasonable response to rogue states and other terrorists. While NMD would not have protected the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers or the Pentagon against hijacked commercial airliners, after 11 September some American political commentators were quick to suggest that the fact that those attacks occurred at all confirmed the logic behind NMD. In other words, the US is vulnerable to rogue states and terrorists, international political actors who cannot be trusted to act in accordance with the norms of the otherwise legitimate global community.²

At a more general level, what the events of 11 September appear to confirm is the establishment view that the most important elements of world politics concern violence, militaries, generals, soldiers, diplomats, guns and bombs; it is a world in which borders and boundaries matter, it’s about Us vs. Them. As Naomi Klein characterized it, “Now is not the time for more understanding, just better intelligence.”³

In the aftermath of 11 September, it has become more difficult—and more important—to question the “self evident” claims of the establishment. I encounter this as a teacher of international relations (IR). For example, when I talk about terrorism in my Introduction International Relations class, I

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¹ Studies in Political Economy 67, Spring 2002

³ Studies in Political Economy 67, Spring 2002
contrast the questions asked by traditional theorists of terrorism to those posed by critical theorists. For the former, it’s a question of “where are they, what are their strategies, how do we stop them, how do we control them?” In contrast, critical theorists want to know who has the power to define both the terrorist and the terrorist act? Who has the power to say that some acts of violence are legitimate, while others are not? At the best of times, it takes a bit of work to make it clear that when critical commentators ask these questions about terrorism, it is not done in order to celebrate terrorist acts of violence. Rather, the point of asking “who has the power to define the terrorist” is intended to signal that all acts of violence need to be condemned, no matter who commits them. After 11 September, this became all the harder to do.

If it has become more difficult to raise critical questions when talking about National Missile Defence or terrorism, what will it mean to areas/modes of inquiry constructed as marginal in both establishment and even some progressive accounts? More specifically, what will it mean to feminist arguments in IR?

There are a variety of ways in which feminists might raise questions about the events of 11 September and the bombing of Afghanistan. One set of questions focuses on how masculinity figures into these events. By masculinity, I do not mean essentialized differences between women and men, with men seen as “war-like” and women as peaceful. By masculinity, I mean the ways in which manliness gets constructed in certain times and certain places, the heroic narratives associated with masculinity and the manner in which one form of masculinity becomes culturally exalted over others. Thus in certain circumstances, strong efforts will be made to link some men’s sense of manliness to machismo, to being tough and being able and willing to be war-like. So we can ask of the events of 11 September, as Cynthia Enloe asks of foreign policy more generally “Are any of the key actors motivated by a desire to appear ‘manly’ in the eyes of their own principal allies or adversaries? What are the consequences?”

Certainly some of the initial reactions to the attacks indicate that a swift, tough, courageous and “manly” reaction was demanded. On the evening of 11 September, former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger said that “There is only one
way to begin to deal with people like this, and this is you have to kill some of them even if they are not immediately directly involved in this thing.”

Former Defense Intelligence Agency officer Thomas Woodrow went one step further, suggesting that “To do less [than use tactical nuclear capabilities against the bin Laden camps in the desert of Afghanistan] would be rightly seen ... as cowardice on the part of the United States and the current administration.”

In the New York Post, Steve Dunleavy commented that “The response to this unimaginable 21st-century Pearl Harbor should be as simple as it is swift—kill the bastards. A gunshot between the eyes, blow them to smithereens, poison them if you have to. As for cities or countries that host these worms, bomb them into basketball courts.”

Not to be outdone, George W. Bush sought to establish his credentials: “Wanted Dead or Alive.”

This kind of masculinist frame can lead decision makers down paths that could, and should, be avoided. As Norman Solomon suggests, some policy options will be foreclosed precisely because they are not “manly” enough:

With starvation closing in on literally millions of Afghani people this autumn, the US government could make an enormously profound statement by bombarding Afghanistan with massive supplies of food instead of warheads. Such an approach would surely earn America’s commander-in-chief the media label of “wimp”—and much worse. Obviously, it’s the sort of risk that the president wouldn’t dare to take.

Another set of questions that feminists would want to explore concern representation. What will these events mean for women and other marginalized peoples’ access to political influence? Who is depicted as having the appropriate expertise? Madeleine Bunting’s analysis of UK papers pointed out that women’s voices in general have been (or have been made) silent, with few or none providing either reporting or commentary on the attack. According to Bunting, the only women represented in the media in the first few days after 11 September were the victims. In short, women have been “cast as passive.”

The question goes much deeper than simply “seeing” women on television or hearing their views about the terror-
ist attacks and the response. As Krista Hunt argues, the representation of women—American or Afghani—as passive accomplishes a number of important things. American women’s passivity confirms their vulnerability, their need for protection, and contributes to justifications for a violent American response. Just as important, the United State’s and the West’s sudden interest in the plight of Afghani women is, at best, suspicious. There has long been information available about the systematic abuse of women in Afghanistan—much of it raised by the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan. Until 11 September, however, it was largely ignored by western governments and the international media. Not only are women’s bodies being “written” in a way which justifies particular forms of military response. The enormous impact on women that will result from that military response will be, if not invisible, at least “justified.”

This is not to suggest that the situation of women in Afghanistan is not horrifying, and indeed a final set of questions which feminists might raise about 11 September concerns the relationship between the deep misogyny inherent in fundamentalisms (all fundamentalisms) and the kinds of violence which erupt from them. The group “Women Against Fundamentalisms” writes that “Fundamentalism appears in different and changing forms in religions throughout the world, sometimes as a state project, sometimes in opposition to the state. But at the heart of all fundamentalist agendas is the control of women’s minds and bodies.” How much does the violence which we saw on 11 September emerge from a complex of factors, one part of which is the offer to “desperate, futureless men the psychological and practical satisfaction of instant superiority to half the human race”?

The questions which feminists can and are raising about the events of 11 September deserve to be engaged. This will require greater understanding, not better intelligence. That understanding will mean looking to different kinds of experts, women and men thus far marginalized in the discussions of 11 September, who might give us more complex ways to think through those events and their aftermath. All who have been affected by the events of 11 September, both directly and indirectly, deserve nothing less.
Notes

9. I do not have the space to discuss here the way in which the terrorists themselves get depicted as “manly” (or as not at all manly), though it is worth pointing out that at least some of the media commentary in the first few days after 11 September pointed to how these acts had “raised the bar” for all terrorist acts in future.
11. Enloe, p. 4.
14. As Hunt points out, when groups such as RAWA raise issues which do not correspond to western or US interests, they continue to go entirely unacknowledged. Perhaps the most important of these is RAWA’s critique of the Northern Alliance, which it claims is just as bad as the Taliban in terms of its treatment of women (Hunt, ms copy pg. 4). Katha Pollitt also notes that there are many questions which are not being raised, for example “Who asks the women of Saudi Arabia, our ally, how they feel about the Taliban-like restrictions on their freedom?” (Pollitt, “Where Are the Women?”).
Studies in Political Economy

Collateral Damage: The New World Order at Home and Abroad
17. Pollitt, “Where are the Women?”