The Enigmatic Lynndie England: Gendered Explanations for the Crisis at Abu Ghraib
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This essay examines the gendered explanations for the prisoner abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib. Specifically, I examine how mainstream news media’s selective focus on Lynndie England encouraged the public to read Abu Ghraib primarily as a gender crisis rather than as a crisis in US military culture. This framing not only deflected attention away from the other soldiers involved in the scandal (particularly the men who were involved) but also diverted criticism away from more comprehensive discussions regarding the US military’s use of abuse and torture, the unlawful detention of suspected terrorists, and the erosion of civil liberties in the post-9/11 era. Moreover, these representations of Abu Ghraib as a gender crisis prompted new criticism regarding gender integration in the military and constructed feminism as the new villain in the American melodrama.

Keywords: Abu Ghraib; War on Terror; Gender Performativity; Melodrama; Feminism

In April 2004, four months after the Department of Defense ordered an internal investigation into allegations of prisoner abuse at the US-controlled detainment facility at Abu Ghraib, a classified report was leaked to 60 Minutes II along with a CD-ROM containing graphic photographs of abuse committed against Iraqi detainees by US troops. On April 28, 60 Minutes II publicly released several of those photographs in its breaking news coverage regarding the Abu Ghraib crisis. Among the photographs included in the report were images of hooded, naked detainees who had been forced to simulate graphic sex acts and naked detainees positioned on top of one another in a human pyramid. The report also indicated that “in most of the pictures, the Americans are laughing, posing, pointing, or giving the camera a
‘thumbs-up.’ These graphic images shocked and outraged audiences around the world and transformed what had been an internal military crisis into a public crisis that had significant ramifications for the Bush Administration and the US military.

In response to the furor surrounding the photographs, the Bush Administration issued a series of public statements that portrayed the abuses as isolated instances perpetrated by “a handful of people.” Despite the Administration’s insistence that the crisis was created by a “few bad apples,” the publicity surrounding the Abu Ghraib photographs continued to prompt intense criticism of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, the denial of civil and human rights, and US military practices in general. Furthermore, Bush’s “bad apple” explanation was complicated by Seymour Hersh’s article titled “Torture at Abu Ghraib,” which was published in *The New Yorker* on May 10, 2004. Hersh’s article was premised on Major General Antonio Taguba’s 53-page classified report, which had been obtained by *The New Yorker.* According to Hersh, the report not only documented “numerous” instances of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, which Taguba described as “sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses,” but also indicted senior commanding officers for their complicity. Hersh described the Taguba Report as an “unsparing study of collective wrongdoing and the failure of Army leadership at the highest levels” and introduced the following question into public conversations: “How far up does the responsibility go?”

In the months that followed the public release of the photographs, national and local news sources published thousands of articles and editorials that discussed the treatment of Iraqi prisoners by US troops, the court-martialing of select troops, and the conditions that led to the breakdown in discipline among those stationed at Abu Ghraib. However, in contrast to Hersh’s article, mainstream news sources often focused their attention on the “unique” perpetrator featured in two of the most widely circulated images—Pfc. Lynndie England. In one of the photographs, England is smiling at the camera as she mockingly points to the genitals of a hooded, naked detainee and gives a “thumbs-up” sign. In another photograph, England, again smiling and giving a “thumbs-up,” is holding the end of a leash that is bound to the neck of a detainee who is lying helplessly on the floor. Although England was one of a handful of soldiers indicted for their conduct at Abu Ghraib, mainstream news media seemed preoccupied with “making sense” of the images of a woman torturer. Indeed, in many news accounts, Hersh’s question “How far up does the responsibility go?” seemed to be replaced by a more gender-specific question: “How could a female soldier commit such heinous acts of violence?”

This essay examines how England’s involvement in the Abu Ghraib crisis was discussed in articles and editorials printed in mainstream newspapers and news magazines between April 2004 and October 2006. I argue that national news outlets often portrayed England as a unique (and arguably more deviant) perpetrator. This framing deflected attention from the male soldiers involved in the crisis and thwarted criticism of US military practices. Additionally, the explanations surrounding England’s conduct reinvigorated the controversies related to gender integration in the military and constructed feminism as the new villain in the American melodrama.
This article proceeds as follows: First, I situate the Abu Ghraib crisis within the gendered and cultural discourse surrounding the War on Terror. Second, I examine how England was “disciplined” in national news coverage by analyzing the gendered explanations surrounding her seemingly unique deviance at Abu Ghraib. Finally, I conclude by arguing that these gendered narratives shaped public discourse surrounding the humanitarian stakes of the War on Terror and the US military’s use of humiliation, abuse, and torture against detainees. By framing the Abu Ghraib crisis as a unique instance of “gender gone bad,” mainstream news media minimized critical questions regarding the systematic nature of the abuse and the culpability of high-ranking military officials and instead promoted a new round of assault on feminism and policies of gender integration such as co-ed training and combat exercises.

Crisis in the War on Terror: The Cultural and Gendered Stakes of Abu Ghraib

American national identity relies heavily on the construction and maintenance of Manichean categories which divide the world into two groups, with one representing “God’s will” and the other representing evil incarnate. Elisabeth Anker explains that the melodrama depicting the epic battle between good and evil is a “pervasive cultural mode that structures the presentation of political discourse and national identity in contemporary America” and often serves as a justification for US military intervention in “enemy” nations.8 Although the American melodrama has had a powerful constitutive effect on national identity and foreign policy for centuries, the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center signified a turning point in American politics and upped the ante on the prevailing cultural war between good and evil. The Bush Administration’s framing of the attacks as the malicious and unprovoked aggression of “evildoers” intensified the American public’s fear of Islamic Others, who were often equated with the faceless yet seemingly ubiquitous threat of terrorism, and exacerbated what Samuel Huntington refers to as “the clash of civilizations.”9 The rhetoric of insecurity surrounding the 9/11 attacks spilled over into the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The stakes of the mission extended far beyond the prevention of future casualties. At stake in the War on Terror was the salvation of the “civilized” world. “Terrorism” became a powerful ideograph that came to represent “an ambiguous but palpable malevolence that must be destroyed for the nation to cleanse itself.”10

The melodramatic rhetoric surrounding Bush’s War on Terror not only rear-ticulated the ideological cultural clash between American heroes and Islamic villains but also championed US military intervention through the use of highly gendered narratives. Carol Stabile and Deepa Kumar explain that although Afghan women’s plight had been ignored for decades by US political figures and mainstream media, narratives regarding the Taliban’s victimization of Afghan women were widely circulated prior to and during the US invasion of Afghanistan.11 According to Kevin Ayotte and Mary Husain, images of shrouded women “played a leading role in various public arguments seeking to justify US military intervention in Afghanistan
following the 9/11 attacks.”12 Similar images of victimized and veiled Iraqi women were circulated prior to the US invasion of Iraq as a means to justify the war as yet another rescue mission designed to protect women.13 The Administration’s frequent mentioning of the “rape rooms” in Iraq heightened the emotional stakes of the US invasion, which the Bush Administration euphemistically dubbed “Operation Iraqi Freedom.”14 These images of women’s victimization generated public sympathy for the helpless female victims and outrage toward the men in the enemy states. As Dana Cloud notes, the discourse surrounding the oppression of women by savage male enemies framed the War on Terror as “the war of ‘saving the brown women from the brown men.’”15

The cultural and gendered narratives surrounding the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq functioned to maintain the moral legibility of the War on Terror under the guise of “white man’s burden.”16 However, the crisis at Abu Ghraib created a significant political and identity crisis for both the Bush Administration and the US military. The images of US soldiers engaging in acts of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse against Iraqi POWs blurred the Manichean divisions between good and evil by featuring American “heroes” as violent perpetrators. Conversely, the images of suffering Iraqi POWs challenged the narrative of righteous redemption that had been used to justify the War on Terror. The images of abuse suggested that during its quest for redemption and security, America had stumbled from its moral high ground and succumbed to the forces of savagery by replicating the enemy’s acts of brutality. Rather than depicting the war in Iraq as a civilizing mission, the Abu Ghraib photographs called into question the justness of the War on Terror as well as the sanctity of military masculinity.

The images of a female torturer also challenged the intelligibility of the War on Terror by destabilizing the cultural and gender expectations associated with Womanhood, particularly White Womanhood. Enloe explains that US military culture and national identity are heavily dependent upon the protection of Western Womanhood, a normative category defined as white, middle-class, heterosexual, and nonaggressive.17 In her analysis of the news coverage of the Jessica Lynch story, Kumar notes that “the deployment of whiteness in the Lynch hero/victim narrative [was] essential to differentiating ‘America’ and the ‘West’ from ‘Islam’ and the ‘Middle East.’”18 In contrast, however, the images of Lyndie England contested the normative boundaries of Western femininity and the notion of “white man’s burden.” These images suggested that brown men needed to be protected from a white woman. Additionally, the graphic photographs not only illustrated US male soldiers’ inability to control their own violence but also their inability to “civilize” their own women. Thus, in many ways, making sense of England’s gender deviance was necessary for rehabilitating US military masculinity and for redeeming the moral legibility of the War on Terror.

In sum, the crisis at Abu Ghraib challenged the cultural and gendered narratives that gave meaning to the War on Terror in particular and to US military culture in general. Although the public release of the photographs initially inspired new controversies regarding the military’s use of torture (which some believed was
sanctioned by the Bush Administration) and public demands for Rumsfeld’s resignation, national sources focused much of their attention on Lynndie England, a woman who quickly became the face of the Abu Ghraib abuse scandal. The following section analyzes mainstream news accounts of England’s conduct at Abu Ghraib and her court-martial. Drawing on Butler’s discussion of gender disciplining, I examine how national sources created an “intelligible” interpretation of England’s conduct by representing her as a unique and pathological gender deviant.

**Disciplining of a Deviant Woman: Making Sense of Lynndie England**

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that the intelligibility of seemingly natural gender identities and behaviors requires the disciplining of performative acts that might “trouble” the coherence of binary sex and gender categories. Indeed, even the labeling of particular performances as transgressive or aberrant reifies the normalcy of binary sex and gender categories. When particular acts of gender transgression, perceived to be extraordinary in nature, become highly visible in public discourse, the “containing” of those acts often entails the reproduction and circulation of elaborate narratives that explain the “abnormalities” in normative ways. According to Judith Halberstam, although almost all acts of gender transgression induce some degree of public discomfort and inquiry, female masculinity (or “unfeminine” femaleness) is particularly disconcerting for the dominant public and often prompts the extreme policing of gender, sex, and sexual behavior. Such policing is illustrated by John Sloop in his analysis of the public discourse surrounding the rape and murder of Brandon Teena, who was described in mainstream media as a twenty-one year old “woman” who had been “living as a man.” These news accounts often depicted Brandon Teena as an unnatural female body who sexually preyed upon unsuspecting heterosexual (and presumably innocent) women in “deceptive” and perverse ways. Mainstream news reports also posited that Brandon Teena’s gender and sexual deviance was a pathological abnormality that resulted from a chemical imbalance or from the psychological and/or sexual abuse that he suffered during his childhood. According to Sloop, the Brandon Teena narrative illustrates that “in general, bodies are forced into male/female categories; once in these categories, they either need to properly perform (i.e., perform according to gender norms) or the search is on for the causes of their ‘malfunction.’” Similar to the Brandon Teena story, mainstream news coverage of England often emphasized her femaleness (as opposed to her role as a soldier) in order to construct her as a unique and arguably more dangerous deviant, a gender outlaw that threatened the sanctity of the US military.

**Ambiguously Gendered: A Portrait of Lynndie England**

The details surrounding England’s involvement in the Abu Ghraib crisis and her subsequent court-martial are complicated and bizarre. England, a 21-year-old Army Reservist from the indigent town of Fort Ashby, West Virginia, enlisted in 2001 as a
means to fund a college education. During her station in Iraq in 2003, England became sexually involved with Spc. Charles Graner, the alleged ringleader of the Abu Ghraib abuse scandal, and in October 2005, she gave birth to his son. In January 2005, England was formally charged under the Uniform Code of Military Justice with 19 separate violations, including conspiracy to commit maltreatment of Iraqi detainees, the maltreatment of detainees, and dereliction of duty. During her trial in May, England pled guilty to seven counts; however, military judge Colonel James Pohl declared a mistrial on the grounds that he could not accept her plea of guilty due to Graner’s unexpected testimony that he had asked England “to perform a legitimate function that he planned to use in future training.” At her retrial in September 2005, England was convicted on one count of conspiracy, four counts of maltreating detainees, and one count of committing an indecent act. She was dishonorably discharged and sentenced to three years in prison.

In many mainstream news sources, the discussion of the Abu Ghraib crisis revolved around England, who was frequently described as a gender abnormality. An article in Newsweek described England as “the infamous female guard at Abu Ghraib Prison,” and Ellen Goodman of The Boston Globe referenced England as the “photogenic fall girl for prisoner abuse.” Over 220 of the articles that I examined referred to England as a “woman” or “female,” and several accounts more creatively described her as the “poster girl” of Abu Ghraib, “the young lady with the leash,” or “the T-shirted dog leash woman.” More than half of those articles also described England’s physical attributes in ways that marked her as distinctly female. Over one-third of the articles made reference to her “petite” or “small” stature, terms that not only signified her femaleness but also physically distinguished her from the male soldiers in her unit.

Although mainstream news outlets often defined England in terms of her femaleness, many accounts also constructed her as a gender enigma, a female who did not quite “fit” within the normative confines of femininity. In an article in the Daily News, England was described as “the pixie-faced poster child of America’s prison abuse scandal,” and an editorial in the St. Petersburg Times referred to her as the “pixie-faced soldier.” Over 30 articles and editorials described England as a pixie, thus constructing her as a mischievous, even malign, childlike sprite trapped within a female body. Other news articles constructed England as a gender aberration by drawing attention to her tomboyish features and behaviors. In an article titled “A Woman Apart,” which was featured in The Washington Post, Lynne Duke wrote:

She seems too small, even pixie-like, to be as sadistically abusive as she’s portrayed ... Even her name—Lynndie R. England—sounds too innocently chirpy to belong to the woman posed in the porn shots taken during her Iraqi deployment. There’s something so girlish about her, though she’s 21, and something boyish, too, with that black beret atop her close-cropped hair and that slight swagger.

Over one-third of the articles commented on England’s “tomboyish” features, including her boyish facial features and “unfeminine” stature as well as her gravitation to “masculine” activities. Indeed, the question posed in a Newsweek
article titled “Explaining Lynndie England” epitomized mainstream news media’s fascination with England’s aberrant gender markings. In the article, Evan Thomas asks, “What made Lynndie England, a patriotic, pixie-ish tomboy who joined the army reserve to pay for college, become the poster girl for sexual humiliation and degradation at Abu Ghraib?”

Mainstream news outlets’ use of sex/gender descriptors framed the public’s perception of England’s conduct (and the Abu Ghraib crisis in general) in significant ways. First, the focus on England and her sex/gender identity encouraged the public to read the Abu Ghraib crisis as a gender crisis associated with femaleness rather than as a crisis associated with military culture (which is defined as inherently masculine). Almost all mainstream news reports failed to reference the sex/gender of the male soldiers who were also indicted in the Abu Ghraib scandal. Instead, the male soldiers were described simply as “soldiers” or “troops.” These selective representations of England’s femaleness functioned to reify the normalcy (and invisibility) of the male soldiers’ gender as well as the gender categories upon which military masculinity relies. Additionally, the representation of England as both “boyish” and “girlie,” female and pixie, situated her between the normative boundaries of masculinity and femininity and woman and child. Hence, England’s “in-betweenness” was articulated in ways that reiterated the naturalness of binary sex and gender categories rather than in ways that problematized those categories. She was represented as being inappropriately masculine as well as inappropriately female, a gender abnormality with one foot in each of these seemingly dichotomous categories. Put simply, she was articulated as both a female deviant and as a deviant female. As such, the public was encouraged to make sense of Abu Ghraib by quarantining and disciplining England’s seemingly unique acts of violent deviance rather than reading the scandal as a military crisis that implicated the men and women serving at Abu Ghraib as well as military culture in general.

**England as a Sexual Deviant**

Many mainstream news accounts also included elaborate narratives regarding England’s sordid sexual past. Articles in national news outlets frequently commented on her history of sexual deviance, particularly her dysfunctional, adulterous sexual relationship with Charles Graner (who was also depicted as a violent sexual deviant) as well as her pregnancy with Graner’s child. John Gonzalez of the *Houston Chronicle* explained that “England was Graner’s frequent visitor at the maximum-security wing where he worked the overnight shift, and officers said both were admonished about adultery because England was married at the time.” Another article published in *The Washington Post* commented that England was “reprimanded four times in six months after being caught in Graner’s bed,” further noting that “it got so bad that she was under orders for a time not to leave her quarters unescorted unless she was going to work, church, the bathroom, or for meals.” The same article recounted the haunting images in less publicized photographs of Abu Ghraib, including photographs depicting lewd sexual acts between Graner and England as well as
photographs of England "doing things to herself."40 Over 30 of the news articles examined described the adulterous relationship between Graner and England. Many of these articles named adultery, along with the maltreatment of detainees, in the list of sadistic acts committed by England and Graner.

These representations of England as a sexual deviant served as additional evidence of her inability to confirm to the "proper" norms of womanhood and provided an explanation for her sexual exploitation of the detainees at Abu Ghraib. Although the depictions of England as a childish pixie, a pre-pubescent tomboy, and a sexual perpetrator might have appeared to conflict with one another, mainstream news media often merged these images into a coherent narrative regarding the imminent dangers associated with gender and sexual confusion and mis-identity. Similar to the news coverage of Brandon Teena, these narratives constructed England as cunning and deceptive in her quest to satisfy her perverse sexual desires. Such narratives enabled the audience to assign blame almost solely to England (and to some degree to Graner) while eschewing questions regarding the abuses committed by other soldiers in the unit or military policies regarding the treatment of detainees.

England’s pregnancy also garnered significant public attention, and mainstream news accounts of her pregnancy as well as the birth of her son exacerbated the confusion surrounding England’s gender and sexual identity. As Barbara Bennett notes, the normative expectations associated with motherhood are highly regulated, and severe disciplinary action arises when mothers display violent tendencies or commit violent acts.41 For example, news coverage of Andrea Yates’s acts of infanticide framed Yates as a "traitor" to her sex/gender and as pathological deviant who successfully “disguised” herself as a loving and nurturing wife and mother.42 In a similar vein, national news coverage of England attempted to resolve the paradoxical image of a pregnant female sexual deviant by constructing her pregnancy as further evidence of her dangerous, pathological mis-identity. Michael Fuoco of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette commented on the absurd and confusing image of England who was “clad in an oversized battle-dress uniform . . . often rubbing her stomach” during her court-martial “involving the conspiracy to maltreat prisoners.”43 An article in the Washington Post also noted that “she is in camouflage green like any other soldier. But her standard BDU, her battle dress uniform, is cut maternity-style to accommodate a bulging stomach, eight months pregnant.”44 Additionally, mainstream news accounts of England following the birth of her son often reiterated England’s dangerous gender and sexual confusion. As an article in the Daily News states,

You can say this much for new mom Lynndie England: She knows how to pose for the camera. You’d never guess from these heartwarming photos . . . that the loving new mom cuddling and kissing her baby is also Lynndie the Leasher, the poisonous pixie of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal.45

Similarly, in the Tampa Tribune Daniel Ruth referenced England as the “Mommie (sic) Dearest of debasement.”46 Although motherhood is usually celebrated as the ultimate joy of womanhood, in the case of England, motherhood was constructed as yet another deviant behavior, the result of an adulterous act committed by a violent
sexual (and gender) transgressor. These news reports constructed England’s son as both the victim and the reproduction (both literally and figuratively) of her sexual perversion.

In sum, many mainstream new accounts encouraged the American public to interpret the Abu Ghraib crisis as an isolated instance of extreme female deviance. Although the representation of England as a female “bad apple” reaffirmed Bush’s explanation for the crisis, national news accounts often emphasizes England’s femaleness (rather than her role as a “bad apple”) and encouraged the public to read Abu Ghraib through the lens of female deviance, thus isolating England from her male counterparts and from military culture. However, the depiction of England as a gender enigma precipitated new public demands for an explanation regarding the cause of her incomprehensible behavior. In response, mainstream media circulated stories that attempted to identify the source of England’s gender abnormalities. The following section examines how mainstream news outlets situated the source of England’s deviance within the normative confines of binary gender categories in order to reassert the stability of those categories and, more importantly, to further absolve the military from responsibility for the crisis at Abu Ghraib.

In Search of England’s “Malfunction”

England’s conduct incited significant public angst not only because the acts themselves were heinous but also because her conduct implicated both the norms of femininity and military culture. Moreover, mainstream news outlets’ framing of England’s behavior as a case of gender deviance encouraged the public to search for the cause of her aberrant behavior. In response, two explanatory narratives were frequently circulated in national news media. The first narrative depicted England as suffering from a unique case of gender confusion that resulted from psychological illness and her “classless” upbringing. The second narrative identified gender integration in the military, particularly co-ed training practices, as the root cause of both England’s gender confusion and the crisis at Abu Ghraib in general. This narrative suggested that gender integration created sexual tension that disrupted both male and female soldiers’ development and maintenance of their “appropriate” gender and sexual identities. Furthermore, this explanation suggested that the crisis at Abu Ghraib was the inevitable result of feminists’ influence on military culture.

A Unique Case of Gender Transgression

One way that mainstream news accounts attempted to make sense of England’s deviance was by depicting her as a psychological “abnormality.” Articles published in The Washington Post, The Houston Chronicle, and The New York Times described England as an oxygen-deprived “blue baby” who suffered from learning disabilities throughout her childhood. Additionally, Newsweek stated that “Lynndie England had issues,” and USA Today reported that England “had learning disabilities and [was] prone to clinical depression that made it difficult for her to function in the
stress of the prison.” These accounts not only attempted to explain England’s inability to distinguish “right” from “wrong” during her station at Abu Ghraib but also offered an explanation for her general inability to perform proper gender and sexual behavior.

Other national coverage identified England’s class status as a root cause of her gender and sexual deviance. Over one-third of the articles examined made reference to England’s “trailer park” upbringing. Several news articles described her as a “hellraiser” from a trailer park family, or “the trailer-trash torturer.” An editorial in _The Washington Post_ argued that England, who lived in a trailer with her family in West Virginia, is a “rare genuine article, the cliché, the stereotype that turns out upon investigation to be true.” The editorial concluded that England was “the sort of woman who gets used by others, most often men” and described her as “powerless everywhere in life except on her end of the leash.” Other news accounts suggested that England’s “trailer-trash” lifestyle resulted in her conceiving a child during an adulterous affair. An editorial featured in the _St. Louis Post-Dispatch_ argued that “there is something absurd about pinning a scarlet letter on a pathetic—though perverse—21-year-old private from West Virginia.” These accounts suggested that the failures of England as both a soldier and a woman were attributed to the moral corruption and “abnormal” socialization associated with “trailer-park” conditions. In contrast, these articles did not reference the class status of the male soldiers involved in the abuse scandal. Thus, class (or lack thereof) was framed as uniquely affecting women’s gender and sexual identity. Such framing was significant because it offered an explanation for England’s unique deviance while thwarting interrogations regarding the military’s class-specific recruiting practices.

In both versions of this narrative, England’s pathological abnormality was constructed as being the primary explanation for her lewd conduct with men in her unit and for her abhorrent treatment of Iraqi prisoners. Similar to the news coverage of both Brandon Teena and Andrea Yates, mainstream news coverage framed England as being simply “out of her mind.” As Shelby Colb notes, the pathologizing of extreme acts of female deviance enables the public “to hold onto its belief that a shockingly deviant force was at work” rather than altering its faith in the cherished assumptions regarding sex and gender. By discussing England as a female “bad apple” who suffered from psychological and class-related “diseases,” mainstream reports framed England as a single case of “gender gone bad.” This narrative enabled the public to condemn England for her deviance while simultaneously upholding the normative characteristics associated with womanhood, particularly Western womanhood.

Although mainstream sources’ attention to England’s pathological abnormalities quelled some curiosity regarding the Abu Ghraib crisis, these explanations failed to account for the behavior of the other soldiers implicated in the scandal. In many accounts, attention to England helped minimize public criticism of the other soldiers involved (particularly the male soldiers); however, the court-martialing of these soldiers continued to inspire some degree of public inquiry. Perhaps, more importantly, the construction of England as a unique deviant did not resolve the
inconsistencies between Bush’s “bad apple” defense and his Manichean construction of the War on Terror. The polarizing rhetoric surrounding the War on Terror left no moral middle ground, as illustrated by Bush’s Address to the Joint Session of Congress on September 20, 2001 in which he proclaimed that “You’re either with us, or you’re with the terrorists.”57 However, his “bad apple” defense for the Abu Ghraib crisis left open for consideration the idea that the horrendous actions of a few are not necessarily representative of an entire culture of people. In an interview with King Abdullah II in May 2004, Bush explained that the pictures from Abu Ghraib do not reflect “the true nature and heart of America.”58 One might argue that the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers were also orchestrated by a few “bad apples” and not representative of the inevitable cultural clash between Western heroes and Islamic villains. Thus, although the construction of England as a pathological deviant encouraged the public to dismiss Hersh’s indictment of the entire chain of command (and the Bush Administration), this narrative also had the potential to undermine the moral legibility of the War on Terror.

The narrative regarding England’s unique gender deviance was supplemented by a second narrative that attempted to account for the deviance of both male and female soldiers at Abu Ghraib. This narrative suggested that the crisis at Abu Ghraib as well as the moral deterioration of military culture was the product of gender-inclusive policies. In this narrative, co-ed training as well as feminism in general became the offending practices that resulted in the extreme gender and sexual confusion exhibited by US soldiers at Abu Ghraib and the overall moral corruption of the US military.

Rehabilitating Military Culture: Indicting Practices of Military Integration

Although many mainstream news accounts described England’s conduct as a form of extreme transgression, some coverage suggested that gender-inclusive policies in the military were producing a culture of gender and sexual confusion among enlistees. Over 30 articles featured in national news media suggested, at least in passing, that co-ed training practices were responsible for the moral decline in military culture in general and the increase in prisoner abuse in particular. For example, an article in The Atlanta Journal-Constitution explained that Elaine Donnelly and other advocates of gender segregation in the military posited that “the distractions of gender mixing in co-ed basic training contributed to the immaturity of the American guards at Abu Ghraib.”59 Additionally, in a scathing editorial printed in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Cal Thomas argued that “the one dirty little secret that no one appears interested in discussing as a contributing factor to the whorehouse behavior at Abu Ghraib is co-ed basic training and what it has done to upset order and discipline.”60 Similarly, Mary Leonard of The Boston Globe noted that in 1997 a Pentagon commission reported that “co-ed housing and training contributed to high rates of misconduct in the military.”61 Leonard’s report also included statements from several conservative opponents of military integration, including Linda Chavez,62 who explained that co-ed units were creating “debilitating sexual tension” in the military.
The article quoted Chavez as stating that “in the case of Abu Ghraib, the presence of women in the military police unit may have even encouraged the obscene misbehavior that the photos reveal.” The same article detailed the disgust and disillusionment of Retired Army General Evelyn ‘Pat’ Foote, who was “extremely disappointed” that the women at Abu Ghraib “did not heed her advice, that to be successful in the military, a woman should act more like a woman than a man.”

Leonard quoted Foote as stating, “I tell them: ‘Bring your competence and humanity, and don’t be one of the boys. Don’t romp, stomp, spit, cuss, or swear . . . but that’s hard advice when you’re in a unit that is 90 percent male, you want to be accepted by the men, and you are young and inexperienced.”

Mainstream news media’s indictment of co-ed training practices was significant for several reasons. First, this explanation assigned a particular deviance to women’s presence in training operations, specifically to combat-related training and to women’s inclusion in military culture in general. By associating co-ed training with the crisis at Abu Ghraib, these narratives offered an explanation that situated England’s gender deviance within the boundaries of normative sex/gender binaries. These explanations suggested that when naturally nonviolent individuals (i.e., women) are asked to perform in ways that are antithetical to their authentic gendered selves, it is logical to predict, that they will perform violence “inappropriately.”

Second, and perhaps more importantly, mainstream news media’s blaming of co-ed training deflected criticism from the US military. The “bad apple” defense did not completely absolve US military culture from blame. The question still remained: Are these bad apples produced within military culture? According to the narrative described above, the answer is a definitive “yes.” However, this narrative also suggested that military culture itself was not to blame for the violence at Abu Ghraib but rather that the altering of military masculinity (i.e., the inclusion of women) resulted in the heinous crimes that were committed. That is, inclusive gender practices disrupted military culture by inciting extreme sexual and gender confusion to the point that male soldiers no longer knew how to be men. The co-ed training defense not only established a causal connection between gender integration in the military and Abu Ghraib but also implied that the prohibition of co-ed training can effectively restore the sanctity of military masculinity and ensure the benevolent exercise of masculine power.

Not only did some mainstream news accounts indict policies of gender integration within the US military, but many of those reports also assigned an external cause for the corruption of military culture: the politics of feminism. As Shannon Holland explains, feminism is often a prime target for proponents of gender segregation, particularly in the area of combat. Holland notes that the capture and rescue of Jessica Lynch was often articulated in mainstream news sources as evidence of the dangers of feminism, which willingly sacrifices women (and in some cases men) “under the guise of equality.” Similarly, public discourse surrounding Abu Ghraib often blamed feminists for perverse gender-bending practices in military culture. In an article in The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Elaine Donnelly was quoted as stating that “I think it’s social experimentation, and I don’t think it’s going to help us win the
war . . . They [feminists] want to masculiz (sic) the women and feminize the men, so that we’re a gender-neutral society.” Similarly, in her article titled “You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby; Was It for This?”, Mary Jo Malone of the *St. Petersburg Times* referenced England’s behavior at Abu Ghraib as evidence of the declining moral character of women. According to Malone, “There you have it: evidence, finally, of how far women have come. We have achieved a perverse equality. We have the right to behave as badly as men.” Finally, in an article in *The Washington Post*, Phyllis Schlafly, president of the Eagle Forum, described the photographs at Abu Ghraib as a “feminist fantasy” and argued that “that’s how feminists think about men.”

The circulation of narratives that identified feminism as the root cause of Abu Ghraib insulated military culture from criticism and functioned as a means to dismiss and even to deride all feminist politics, “including those that challenge the very nature of war and military intervention.” In this narrative, both England and the male soldiers involved in the Abu Ghraib crisis were depicted as victims of dangerous feminist policies rather than as violent perpetrators. Additionally, this narrative externalized blame for Abu Ghrain, thereby redeeming military culture. Mainstream news outlets often articulated a narrative that depicted military culture as yet another casualty of feminism, hence isolating the source of the abuse from the culture in which it occurred. The allegations that feminism was responsible for the “uncivilized” behavior of US soldiers at Abu Ghrain rehabilitated the American melodrama surrounding the War on Terror by introducing feminism as the new villain seeking to destroy “our way of life.” Thus, the disciplining of feminism became the preventative solution necessary for restoring the sanctity and morality of US military masculinity and the War on Terror.

**Conclusion**

The public discourse surrounding the photographs from Abu Ghrain created a significant crisis by implicating the Bush Administration’s righteous call to arms against global terrorism and US military culture in general. However, despite the initial questions regarding the extent to which senior commanding officers were responsible for the atrocities committed against detainees, mainstream news media’s focus on Lynndie England encouraged the public to read the Abu Ghrain scandal as a unique gender crisis rather than as a military crisis. Moreover, the explanations offered in some news accounts coded England as a symbol of the sexual confusion produced by military integration and feminists’ dangerous social experiments regarding gender equality. These explanations constructed an external cause for the sexual anarchy and abuses that took place at Abu Ghrain. Although these explanations did not completely allay public criticism of the Bush Administration’s War on Terror and the US military, this article suggests that the preoccupation with England significantly shaped the critical questions that guided public discussions surrounding the Abu Ghrain crisis. The initial questions posed by Hersh regarding the frequent use of torture, abuse, and humiliation at Abu Ghrain as well as his indictment of the chain of command were often diminished by mainstream news
media’s focus on gender-specific questions that attempted to “make sense” of a case of extreme female deviance.

One implication of the gendered framing of the Abu Ghraib crisis is that these representations deflected attention from the multiple acts of abuse committed against detainees. In many mainstream news stories, the spectacle of England as a sexual perpetrator occupied center stage. Although the initial story featured by 60 Minutes II mentioned the involvement of both male and female soldiers, much of the story focused on the multiple forms of violence committed against Iraqi detainees. Additionally, in his article, Hersh included the following descriptions of abuse and torture, as documented in the classified report produced by General Taguba:

Breaking chemical lights and pouring the phosphoric liquid on detainees; pouring cold water on naked detainees; beating detainees with a broom handle and a chair; threatening male detainees with rape; allowing a military police guard to stitch the wound of a detainee who was injured after being slammed against the wall in his cell; sodomizing a detainee with a chemical light and perhaps a broom stick, and using military working dogs to frighten and intimidate detainees with threats of attack, and in one instance actually biting a detainee.\(^73\)

In April 2004, Rumsfeld also admitted that “there are a lot more pictures” which are too graphic for public audiences.\(^74\) However, mainstream news outlets’ decision to circulate and to explain the photographs featuring England’s sexual humiliation of prisoners encouraged the public to read the Abu Ghraib crisis as an isolated instance, despite the fact that these were only a few of the 1,800 pictures taken at Abu Ghraib.\(^75\) These narratives shaped public perceptions about the definition of torture (as opposed to sexual humiliation) and the extent to which humiliation, abuse, and torture were utilized as interrogation techniques at Abu Ghraib.

Second, the gendered narratives of Abu Ghraib often failed to put the Abu Ghraib crisis in conversation with other controversies surrounding prisoner abuse at other US detainment facilities and the humanitarian consequences of winning the War on Terror. Indeed, some critics have argued that the atrocities committed at Abu Ghraib illustrate the Administration’s general disregard for the Geneva Convention and its willingness to sacrifice human life and dignity in its quest to do “whatever it takes” to “bring justice to our enemies.”\(^76\) These critics have also argued that the controversies surrounding Abu Ghraib are inherently tied to other military and political controversies such as those regarding the unlawful detainment of suspected terrorists, the abuse and torture of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, and the use of waterboarding as an interrogation method. However, mainstream news media’s focus on England not only thwarted public conversations about the definition of torture but also deflected more global criticism regarding the ways in which the melodrama surrounding the War on Terror constructs particular lives as being expendable. In the global War on Terror, a war that Bush described as a “crusade” against evil,\(^77\) Americans and the world have witnessed an increase in human rights violations as well as the scaling back of civil liberties, all in the name of national security. The crisis at Abu Ghraib was a kairotic moment in which the “killing (and torturing) to save” mentality that seems fundamental to the War on
Terror might have been critically interrogated. However, the construction of the crisis as a unique gender atrocity shifted the focus of conversation, leaving the moral framework of the War on Terror (and the consequences of that moral framework) unchallenged.

Finally, mainstream news coverage of Abu Ghraib illustrated the ways in which gender identity has been (and continues to be) fundamental to the nature of war and militarism. As illustrated above, the rationales for the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq were often constructed in relation to normative culture and gender assumptions regarding women’s vulnerability and dependency on Western Man, the noble, masculine hero who must fulfill his righteous mission of "white man’s burden." Although, England’s conduct at Abu Ghraib deeply troubled the ideological expectations associated with Woman (particularly Western Woman), the construction of England as an abnormality left intact the intelligibility of the categories upon which Western Man relies. Similar to the discourse surrounding Andrea Yates, many mainstream news accounts constructed England as being "out of her mind," a gender abnormality that does not reflect "normal" women. Moreover, these reports often used the same pathological explanation to account for the men involved at Abu Ghraib. If the male perpetrators were also suffering from severe gender and sexual confusion, conditions brought on by unnatural and dangerous "gender-bending" in military culture, then the public could detach the actions of a few from military culture in general, thereby holding onto its faith in the sanctity of military masculinity and maleness. By emphasizing the visibility of England’s female deviance, mainstream news media drew attention to England’s failures both as a soldier and as a woman and reinvigorated attacks against gender integration in the military and feminism in general. These narratives framed the crisis at Abu Ghraib as an example of feminism and gender equality that has “gone too far.” Such explanations not only informed the specific debate regarding women in combat but also shaped public understanding of gender equality and, to some degree, functioned as a rationale for containing women’s rights behind and beyond the frontlines of combat. Hence, the gendered framing of the Abu Ghraib crisis reiterated “white man’s burden” to civilize inferior populations abroad as well as the women in his own country.

The controversies surrounding the Abu Ghraib crisis continue to affect current conversations regarding national identity, militarism, and the War on Terror. This article argues that mainstream news media often went to great lengths to make sense of England’s conduct (and the Abu Ghraib crisis itself) in ways that maintained the moral integrity of the melodrama surrounding the War on Terror and the gendered framework that gives meaning to US military culture. By situating mainstream news outlets’ representation of England with the cultural and gendered narratives surrounding the War on Terror, we are better able to understand the constituted force of the American melodrama and, more importantly, how questions regarding the use of torture and abuse are contained in public discourse.
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Notes


[6] Between March 2003 and October 2005, nine soldiers, including three women, were court-martialed for their participation in the abuse at Abu Ghraib. Both former specialist Megan Ambuhl, not featured in any of the circulated photographs, and former specialist Sabrina Harmon, photographed standing over a corpse, were dishonorably discharged. Harmon was also sentenced to six months in prison. Additionally, former Brigadier General Janis Karpinski, who headed Abu Ghraib, was relieved of duty and demoted to the rank of colonel. Although these women were implicated in the Abu Ghraib scandal, news media’s selective attention on England serves as the focus for this analysis. I cannot completely account for many news sources’ fascination with England; however, I posit that the photographs of England garnered significant attention because they provided visual evidence of her transgression (only one other woman was featured in the photographs) and more importantly, because they featured a female soldier actively engaging in the abuse.

[7] Using the Lexis-Nexis database, I gathered over 1,000 national newspaper and news magazine articles printed between April 2004 and October 2006 that include the terms “England” and “Abu Ghraib.” After sorting my results based on relevance and length, I examined the first 300 articles, including headline articles and articles printed in editorial and opinion sections of major US newspapers and news magazines.


Cloud, “To Veil the Threat of Terror,” 286.


Donald Rumsfeld did not submit his resignation until November 2006, nearly three years after the investigation of Abu Ghraib began.

Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990), 23.


Sloop, “Disciplining the Transgendered,” 182.

Sloop, “Disciplining the Transgendered,” 182.


Carla Power, “All the War’s a Stage,” Newsweek, June 20, 2005, 62.


“Iraq Symbols, Scapegoats,” St. Petersburg Times, May 10, 2005, 8A.


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[62] Linda Chavez is the president of the Center for Equal Opportunity, a think tank that opposes various forms of affirmative action, including military integration.


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[73]  Hersh, “Torture and Abu Ghraib,” 42.
[76]  “President Keeps Focus on 9/11; Kerry Defends Criticism,” The Seattle Post-Intelligencer, March 12, 2004, A6. These were phrases that Bush used often after the 9/11 attacks and during the 2004 presidential campaign.