

Militarized Masculinities and the Erasure of Violence

AARON BELKIN IN CONVERSATION WITH TERRELL CARVER

Note by Special Issue Editors

We invited Terrell Carver to contribute to the Symposium on ‘Rethinking Masculinity and Practices of Violence’ held at the London School of Economics and Political Science in May 2011. Following his many interventions on the politics of masculinity in global politics, not least *Gender Is Not a Synonym for Women* (1996), ‘Being a Man’ (2006) and ‘Men in the Feminist Gaze’ (2008), we could think of few who were better placed to shed light on the issues at stake. In typically generous style, Terrell’s paper sang the praises of Aaron Belkin’s *Bring Me Men* (2012), which was at that point still in the final stages of review. While placing that forthcoming work vividly into our consciousness, Terrell’s paper gave rise to another idea: to put him into direct conversation with Aaron on how masculinity and violence may be connected. And so the idea for the following conversation was born. This conversation was carried out face-to-face and virtually on numerous occasions in Bristol and San Francisco. Their most recent meeting took place at 9 am on 6 September 2011 over excellent coffee on Folsom Street in San Francisco’s Mission District, just as the sun was breaking through the fog.

Aaron Belkin (AB): Can we use this opportunity to reflect on how and in what ways military masculinities might get implicated in the erasure of violence? When I talk with non-American visitors to the United States, I am sometimes struck by the clarity with which they notice the militarization of our culture. Sure, I am familiar with heightened scholarly concerns about American militarism, but does that really mean that the phenomenon is obvious to foreigners, even after a short visit? Evidently it does. But if militarism and particularly masculine aspects of militarism continue to work their way into ever more obscure nooks and crannies of American culture, this has also been an era when state-sponsored violence has been difficult to see. Everyone knows that the USA has been at war in the Middle East for almost a decade. But we

almost never see blood. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians died during the war. But how often do we see close-up images of the dead? So, I wonder if these two phenomena are connected, and in that spirit I'll repeat the question: how and in what ways do military masculinities get implicated in the erasure of violence? That's a short question that probably calls for a long answer.

Terrell Carver (TC): This is an intriguingly counter-intuitive question. Militarized masculinities are about violence. They advertise it, they celebrate it. A few minutes of sampling worldwide military recruitment video clips on YouTube will show you nothing else but representations of violence, notwithstanding the different ways that various advertisers send the message, and the different ways that these messages might be received by men, boys, women and girls. Militarized masculinities are the normalized and legitimized ways through which state violence is not merely represented as itself but also distinguished – usually by silent implication – from any number of other things. If we're looking at soldiers and weaponry, boys and toys, then we're *not* looking at international business executives, the local police or gangster drug-lords.

Or are we? Charlotte Hooper (*Manly States*, 2001) and Cynthia Enloe (*Globalization and Militarism*, 2007) have taught us to see otherwise. The production, consumption, distribution and exchange of more-or-less organized violence are hardly confined to the military or men, but they are certainly masculine and masculinized, and profoundly destructive, even – or indeed especially – as 'defence'. We know them when we see them.

Or do we? We need to look more closely at what we are looking at. What we are looking at is served up to us, precisely so that we can see 'it' for what it is, and 'what it is' has already been decided for us. What's in the picture isn't real violence at all; it's a sanitized representation of legitimated (and sometimes illegitimated) violence, as you suggest, Aaron.

BOUNDARY MAKING

AB: Through which processes do you see the erasure of violence as being accomplished?

TC: Actually we're looking here not just at the representations of objects but also, importantly, at two *discursive* boundary lines that are drawn through political power-processes.

One line is between good guys and bad guys, the former smiling and wearing clean outfits, and the latter scowling, demonized and 'wanted', either dead or on trial. The other boundary line is between what we can look at, and what we can't. The latter is a taboo zone, and it's everywhere. Violence as it really happens isn't represented; it's obscene in the ancient Greek sense, enacted off-stage. It's too upsetting for the news, too gruesome for the information

services, too uncomfortable for everyone. The no-body-bags/no-coffins policy of recent US administrations is all about the erasure of violence. Even closed-casket funeral processions in public (newly ‘Royal’ Wootton Bassett¹ comes to mind) make violence invisible. They are symbolic. They are reprises of representations. They reproduce the vocabulary of *non-taboo* communication. Violence in this mode is essential to fiction, movies, TV drama, pictures, prose journalism and all the vicarious things we know about. But real violence as it happens is erased.

AB: So, you are arguing that militarized masculinities can be thought of as sites where two distinct but related boundary lines get articulated, one which distinguishes the good guys from the bad, and the other separating out what we can look at from what we can’t. In other words, militarized masculinities are sites for separating off the taboo/obscene/abjected from that which is legitimate. Can I ask you for an example of the articulation of the second boundary line through militarized masculinities?

Part of the reason I’m asking is that I understand militarized masculinities as sites where the taboo/obscene/abjected get produced *and* incited, not just suppressed. This is an argument that I develop in my new book *Bring Me Men* (2012), where I suggest that to attain masculine status in the modern American military, troops must disavow femininity to be sure, but they also must embrace that which has been constructed as abjected, such as femininity, queerness, softness, weakness and the like. For example, at the same time that male, military bodies are not supposed to be penetrated by bullets, penises or anything else, military culture often involves the use of male–male rape for socialization and initiation.

I guess I’m making two related points about your observation. The first is that military masculinity may involve inciting abjection (as in regular practices of male–male rape), not just repressing it. The second is that while military masculinity may be a site where boundary lines get drawn, I am wondering if it isn’t also an occasion for conflating and confusing abjection and normativity, not just distinguishing them from one another. To continue the example that I referred to above, penetration of the male, military body is not only constructed as the ultimate taboo and abjected state of being, but also something that the troops must endure. And, when male troops are raped, penetration can conjure up multiple meanings in military culture, including the notion that the victim is too weak to fend off attack, and hence not worthy of being a warrior (and so abjected), but also that he is strong enough to take it like a man. Binaries can be conflated and thus confused, as well as enacted or repressed.

TC: I only came up with those ideas because you formulated such a provocative question. My first thought was to go to the politics of representation (rather than to actualities *within* the military), that is, how images and other texts are constructed to show us what militarized masculinities are, so we know

them when we see them. Or rather we know those representations as militarized masculinities because militarized governments want us to see militarized masculinities only in terms of those representations, and not in some other way.

It struck me that the stereotypical version of militarized masculinities ‘approved for release’ either erases real violence altogether or tames and sanitizes it through symbolism. Thus in parades or recruiting videos we see clean uniforms, unmarked bodies (and, so it seems, untroubled minds) and weapons that aren’t firing at all, or if so, only on training exercises with blanks. Where we get noise it’s action-adventure as a cinematic genre – fighter jet fly-bys, chopper soundtracks, thundering music and the like. We get good guys (some of whom can be female), with bad guys well off stage but ever-present, as otherwise the narrative makes no sense, and neither does the political rationale. The political narrative is that we’re good guys, and bad guys are so bad they are unrepresentable and better watch out.

What’s not in the picture, or is presented only in some de-natured Orwellian way in the text (such as body counts, dead insurgents, collateral damage and so forth), is the mess, confusion, boredom, brutality and in fact real violence that gets done, often highly technologized as we know, and often only represented in long-shots of explosions. On the TV news we’re warned that ‘some images may be upsetting’, because there are wounded or dead people (on 10 November 2011, I note, it was dead children²), but we’re seldom if ever shown any identifiable killing and maiming in real time up close where we would start to feel, as in the trope from a 1950s US television show,³ ‘You Are There!’ Famously the news-reel *real* execution sequence from the Vietnam War hasn’t been repeated, at least in mainstream media for general release.⁴

AB: Thus we have a good guy/bad guy boundary and a represented/unrepresentable boundary, framings that are co-constitutive and reinforcing of the message that our troops are clean and good.

TC: Yes, and this is very much your territory, Aaron, where you have pointed out that militaries (and other institutions) produce both sides of constitutive boundaries (e.g. being clean and being dirty, being honest and being corrupt), and – a real breakthrough – that they also produce continuous *uncertainty* about where the boundary is and where anyone is in relation to these moving goalposts. On the view that you have developed, anxiety is productive of insecurity, insecurity is productive of discipline, and discipline is necessarily arbitrary. So the Weberian model of institutions as patterns of machine-like regularity is a myth that produces a reality insofar as people believe in the myth, but the messy and horrendous reality of violence, if only we could sneak a look, belies what we believe we know ‘always already’ by Weberian institutional analysis (and uncritical acceptance of myth).

An alternative and disrupting view of militarized masculinities could of course be constructed, for example maimed and disabled bodies, broken and

disoriented minds, dirt and grime and all the other kinds of uncleanliness that you have documented so well in your book *Bring Me Men*. But then I've been asking the question lately: 'Exactly how are militarized masculinities and competitive global capitalism different, if at all?' I am thinking of Hooper's alignment of the two in *Manly States*. Global capitalism produces pollution the way that militarized masculinities – given the resources – produce war. If the Tea Party (and the like) targeted 'defence spending', I would make a strategic choice and join up!

WHY MILITARY MASCULINITIES?

AB: Let's take as a given your point that military masculinities are sites where these boundary-making processes play out. From my perspective, Cynthia Enloe's 'maneuvers' is just the right term to invoke here, because we're not quite talking about a state conspiracy in our discussion on boundary-making processes. After all, some of the processes you describe are orchestrated by journalists and movie directors. But at the same time, these are initiated and sustained by people who take concrete steps, and not by passive, hidden amorphous 'structures'. So, all kinds of people – bureaucrats, admirals, reporters, musicians – take steps that constitute the boundaries that you specify above.

But why are military masculinities the sites where a lot of this boundary-making activity takes place? Why not postal service femininities, for example?

TC: There probably are postal service femininities. The US postal service, historically speaking, was a rather feminized profession, though – in the olden days (of the 1950s) very largely staffed by men. I remember a man telling me (b. 1946) as a boy that 'selling stamps all your life is no job for a man'.

Nation-states and militaries are pretty much the same thing, with rare exceptions, and even in avowedly peaceful nation-states (e.g. in Scandinavia) the military occupies an important symbolic position. Where it is overtly constituted only as a self-defence force (e.g. in Japan), there is considerable debate now to 'regularize' this institution, as otherwise the country isn't a 'proper' nation-state. The citizen-soldier army in avowedly neutral Switzerland is much the same. It is just ratcheted down to something close to hand-to-hand combat level with conscripted male citizens required to train with small arms, and have them 'ready' at home. I leave Costa Rica, which abolished its military in 1948, aside here because it is the single exception.⁵ Postal services are important and in some cases iconic (I am thinking of the Swiss one), but they are further down the line in terms of nationalistic symbolism and hero worship.

Even before the development of the modern nation-state, 'military man' was manly man, without a doubt, even if the armies were privatized and feudal or imperial and cosmopolitan. Pursuing the historical angle for comparison, I'd

suggest that it was less clear the further back we go that the ‘good guys’ are ‘our’ guys rather than just somebody’s guys, and hence – from many perspectives – it was easier to question whether they were actually ‘good’ at all. Various religious and monastic or contemplative traditions are another point of comparison (I’m trying to be sufficiently general here to cover both European and East and Southeast Asiatic civilizations, or at least trying to make an attempt to do so). Although not obviously nationalist or militarist, religious orders are most often organized exclusively around men in hierarchies, or in separate hierarchies for men and women where the latter are subordinated. Of course religious orders with weapons, even Buddhist warriors, are not unknown. So we’re back to the co-constitution of masculinities and militaries, or at least militarized organizations and behaviour.

AB: OK, but why have militarized masculinities increasingly become such a formative zone and power centre?

TC: The answer is that nation-states define themselves and their power hierarchies in these terms (masculinities and militaries). Through the magic of taxation national states spend *enormous* amounts of money on masculinities and militaries. The current rival is (men’s) sports, which are prime objects through which nation-states project their barely repressed and far-from-sublimated fantasies of domination and destruction. Interestingly some militaries have withdrawn from their role as symbol of, and producer of, manly heterosexual men – readers should remember the screams of rage involved⁶ – and it is interesting to see attention shifting in this respect to top-class sports, where we are supposed to know and admire manly men (who can’t be seen to compete directly with women, at least so far). The London Olympics 2012, like all the others, will of course be about ‘goodness’ and ‘cleanliness’, and marching with flags. It also raises issues of opportunity costs and displacements, litter and pollution, sex work and violence, international securitization and local policing, just as you might predict.

So I’m following the money here, Aaron. You get what you pay for, or rather militaries are important sites for masculinities because we are made to pay to get this ‘job’ done. Of course I don’t think we need to have this job done, except for the circular reasoning that others do. The sums are huge, the budgets are out of sight (often literally), and – given that rational discourse gives way to a ‘security’ discourse of fantasy and paranoia – we are in the realm where taboo occludes our vision, and symbolism is what we do.

AB: Perhaps I’m a little confused here, Terrell, but I don’t quite follow the case you make above. I’m trying to get a sense of two different pieces of the argument you made near the beginning of our conversation, namely that militarized masculinities are sites where two boundary lines get articulated, one distinguishing good guys from bad guys, and the other distinguishing what we can see from what we’re not supposed to see. On the one hand, my question

is about why the formative zone and power centre that you mention is a militarized zone. The other is why, within the context of boundary making that plays out in this zone, we're talking about masculinities as opposed to femininities or other identifications.

The argument you spell out above addresses the first question, and, if I'm hearing you correctly, you come pretty close to a kind of fusion of a structural argument about security threats which prompt states to establish and maintain powerful militaries, like Kenneth Waltz's (1979), with an argument about isomorphism in which states see each other building militaries and then engage in a kind of mimicry in which they copy each other (Meyer *et al.* 1997). Out of all this we get high percentages of state budgets devoted to military spending, and large military organizations. Somewhere in this process (as both a cause and an effect of the taxation needed to build these military forces?) governments work hard to fuse militarized ideals with national identity, so much so that national identities and martial values become hard to distinguish.

But then there's still the question of how and why masculinities (rather than some other identities) get implicated in boundary-making processes that play out in this formative zone and power centre, especially in an era when more and more fighting is done by button-pushers who sit in remote office cubicles, where they fly drones and target rockets and missiles at unsuspecting victims.

TC: Boundary making requires that we see some things clearly, and know that other things are there even if not pictured or referenced. In Derridean terms this is maybe an 'absent present' or 'constitutive outside', a realm of ideas not specifically cited but through which we are supposed to get the full message. Sometimes this is known as erasure, and since erasures tend to leave smears and traces, I wonder if that idea might be helpful. The smears and traces are in ourselves, when we make sense – sometimes in serial attempts – of what we see by relating it to what we already think we know. Basically a military-recruiting poster-boy – a clean-and-smiling soldier doing 'his thing' – has an absent-present in the shot: the 'womenandchildren' he (or a sufficiently butched-up she) is protecting. As with any attempt to make and communicate meaning, though, the process is necessarily ambiguous and indeterminate. There could be any number of other absent-present ideas, depending on the writer-and-reader situation. In this case it could just as well be some stereotypical enemy figure; I picked on one figure that in national warrior-logic and peace-process symbolism seems likely – the 'bad guy'.

Any boundary is constructed – albeit ambiguously and insecurely – in this way. I guess I'm signing up to the security dilemma logic and isomorphic mimicry that you describe, but only as a bare description of the way that politicians, policy-makers, lobbyists, journalists and others of that ilk mostly think, and most particularly in the wealthy and high-tech countries where economic interests mesh with political systems to make this outlook persuasive and lucrative (for some, and expensive for others). Of course in poorer countries the situation is often even worse, and indeed the percentage of the

world economy wrapped up in the arms trade, ‘defence’ technologies and industries, and national ‘prestige’ projects is huge. There are of course other identities that are constructed and distinguished in these processes, for example whiteness (and scalar distance from blackness), but the masculinization is striking. Role-model men are *national* heroes, not just heroes (even when they are women),⁷ and these are all ‘good guys’ because they are ‘ours’, which presumes that we know who ‘we’ are. That’s easy, because we have all that flag-waving and constant nationalism to tell us (and whole days off to think about it). Sadly it’s the major way we have of making sense of people, and of the world. These are geographies of nationhood and identity, which are all too real, precisely because people believe in them. Amusingly, perhaps, the current fad for DNA-tracing of one’s own genes then projects these current racialized and (absurdly) nationalized geographies back into the dim and distant recesses of the Stone Age.

Everyone knows that military fighting is increasingly technologized and remotely operated, but how often do we see this represented visually? And how much visual and symbolic work is wrapped up by contrast in military masculinity which – honestly – looks just as it did in the Iron Age? Perhaps nowadays with fewer short leather skirts and buck-naked wrestling posters, I admit. The Olympics, for all the inclusivity, still looks quite militarized to me, and the (wobbly) sex-binary there shows us who the men are (and we’re *really* worried when the women aren’t ‘womanly’ enough, not the other way round). Sadly, as in the Iron Age, the games are really a slightly morphed metaphor for hand-to-hand combat. Sexism and patriarchy sell products, and national budgets are products that taxpayers are made to buy (whatever the political system). It could all be different, but it wouldn’t be as readily intelligible. We live in a world of stale and destructive clichés.

Thank you for the great questions, Aaron. And apologies for the lengthy replies, and the sad state of the world.

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Notes

1 Wootton Bassett is a small town in Wiltshire honoured with ‘Royal’ patronage (the first since 1909) in March 2011 in recognition of the role the townspeople played in marking the occasions when convoys of military vehicles moved through it. They were en route from a nearby airbase to a hospital morgue at Oxford where

the repatriated remains of UK service personnel could be claimed for subsequent funerals. The route through the town happened to be the only one available, and the spontaneous displays of respect grew into nationally reported events as families and others gathered amid a line of national and military flags dipped firmly onto the ground. On the whole participants and observers were left to draw whatever conclusions they wished about the politics of the wars involved, amid an ‘activity’ of largely silent mourning for the dead.

- 2 BBC television news broadcast recording a drone-strike in Afghanistan.
- 3 ‘You Are There!’ was a network television show (based on an earlier radio dramatization) hosted by Walter Cronkite of CBS News, on the air between 1953 and 1957. Using a news format it ‘reported’ on historical events (e.g. the Hindenburg disaster of 1937, the death of Socrates in 399 BCE, etc.) as if they were happening in the present, including ‘live’ interviews staged between actors and ‘TV reporters’ who were ‘on the scene’.
- 4 One of the iconic photographs of the Vietnam War was taken in 1968 by Eddie Adams, showing the moment at which the South Vietnamese National Police Chief put a pistol to the head of an alleged Viet Cong fighter and executed him summarily; this was also captured by NBC news. The picture can be found on numerous websites, generally captioned as ‘Tet Execution’.
- 5 Costa Rica maintains a police guard but has had no standing army since that time, and the national constitution reflects this.
- 6 Certainly in the UK and the USA the military issued near-hysterical claims about ‘breakdowns in discipline’ in response to legal and political challenges to the ban on recruitment, and continuing service, of ‘out’ gay personnel. For a vivid account of events in the USA, see Belkin (2011).
- 7 Masculinity and femininity are oftentimes experienced and projected in the ‘wrong’ body and normalized as such. Female priests in Christian denominations are not ‘priestesses’ but priests in a masculinized way, albeit representing a kindly, patriarchal masculinity of care rather than one of macho aggression and violence. Female soldiers are similarly situated, though with respect to masculinity of the latter sort. Of course many feminists have questioned the masculine gendering of organizations of both sorts in the first place, and it is also the case that tensions between gender-role assumptions and consciousness of sexed bodies remain in practice.

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