

**Aaron Belkin, *Bring Me Men: Military Masculinity and the Benign Façade of American Empire, 1898-2001***, New York, Columbia U.P., 2012, 244 pp.

*Reviewed by R. Tyson Smith*

When Aaron Belkin's *Bring Me Men* came across my desk, I could not resist chiming in. Masculinity within the United States military is a topic so closely aligned with my own research interests that I had to give it a close read and weigh in on the conversation. Having completed it, I can say that the book very much succeeds in its efforts to interrogate the contours and implications of American military masculinity (from 1898-2001). However, like any book, it is not without some shortcomings.

As many scholars of American military contend, including myself, it is concerning that Americans tend to celebrate military masculinity uncritically. Readers of *Bring Me Men*, if nothing else, will surely reassess this common, almost knee-jerk adoration. Belkin – a professor of political science at San Francisco State University, and director of the Palm Center : a University of California think tank performing research and advocacy in the areas of gender, sexuality, and the military – convincingly shows how “*military masculinity is a site where some of the most disappointing aspects of American culture come together, and where the US fails to live up to its highest ideals*” (p.173).

Through an exploration of the gendered structuring of the United States military, Belkin demonstrates how the ideal of American military masculinity is premised on a “*simultaneous renunciation and embrace of the unmasculine*” (p.33). These contradictions include messages and practices of soldiers’ impenetrability and penetrability, filth and cleanliness, infantilization and reverence, and barbarism and civility. The book’s exploration of the confusing splits reveal many “*abject undersides*” of the US military, undersides which demonstrate how “*masculine warriors*” are in fact a bundle of gendered contradictions who are far more ambiguous, feminine, penetrated, filthy, and barbaric than both scholars and the American public ordinary believe. Belkin suggests that the American empire is structured by these very contradictions and in our glorification of the warrior archetype, we “*idealize some of the most troubling aspects of empire*” (p.46).

The book disrupts the well-established, and I would add obvious, critiques of American military masculinity as the disavowal of the *unmasculine*. When we look more closely at the contradictions of masculinity which structure the American military, we see that “*military culture involves not just a flight from the unmasculine, but a simultaneous endurance and even embrace of it as well*” (p.24). Going further, “*the creation of a masculine armed force depends*

*on a surprising degree of engagement with the very sorts of unmasculine foils that masculinity seems by its very definition to be positioned against” (ibid.).*

In his cleverly titled “Well-Reared Boys” and “Man Over Board” chapters, Belkin shows how American soldiers are constructed as impenetrable even though rape, bodily secretions, and penetrations of various orifices are far from unique. The impenetrability principle is maintained despite the fact that

service members have penetrated and been penetrated by each other continuously [and] their anxieties about penetration have been structured by a split and then projected onto incoherent imaginations about gay men as violently aggressive penetrators but also passively weak victims of penetration” (p.99).

Belkin points out a reason why male-to-male rape is so threatening to the institution: the violation calls into question the “*archetypical image of the masculine warrior by implying that the soldier/victim is too weak to fend off an attack*” (p.114).

Using data from the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland, and interview data from rape victims and mental health professionals, Belkin goes to great efforts to document routine instances of rape in the military. This social problem – much like veterans’ suicide – is very difficult to measure because the US military conceals (or distorts) such information – the institution is vested in keeping the reality of this scourge out of public view.

The chapter on rape also reveals numerous contradictions that are either commonly dismissed by mainstream commentators or off-limit by scholars. For example, Belkin uncovers certain soldiers’ eroticization of drill instructors which he contends stem from the United States Marine Corps recruit training which instils the need to take orders and be dominated. Along similar lines, Belkin documents an instance in which rape is experienced as having an element of pleasure, a highly controversial idea.

Belkin demonstrates an impressive command of the literature, relying on a vast array of sociological, anthropological, political science, and historical sources. Using declassified or buried documents, some of which he dug up through the use of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), he interrogates trends and histories which the military is eager to keep opaque, if not altogether covered up. For example, using data from the FOIA he demonstrates how rape is systematically downplayed and repeatedly framed as a women’s issue. (He also details why male-female rape is much less threatening to military culture than male-male rape.). Furthermore, the forty-five pages of endnotes are a treasure trove of helpful elaboration and important clarification (Many of the book’s images are of poor quality, unfortunately.).

Having just completed reviews of my own manuscript on performances and contradictions of masculinity among professional wrestlers,<sup>1</sup> I must admit that I was sensitive

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<sup>1</sup> See : <https://sites.google.com/site/tyson321>.

to *Bring Me Men*'s repeated mapping and signposting (or as one reviewer of my own manuscript said, "throat-clearing"). The writing is clear and arguments are nicely articulated though the summarizing of earlier chapters slows down the read and makes the book a bit longer than necessary.

One critique regards the support for the argument about building American empire. Belkin argues that...

when contradictions that structure American military masculinity get normalized or hidden in plain sight [this] can make broader military and imperial contradictions seem unproblematic at the same time" (p.49).

While I believe this idea is important and certainly provocative, it would benefit from more substantiation. Examples of how masculinity is constructed vis-à-vis American empire are peppered into a few chapters, yet the only chapter that directly examines the American military *abroad* is "Civilizing Duties". While an interesting read – and another clever title because much of it details faeces – this chapter about American military in the Philippines is among the shortest chapters and found at the end of the book. I hoped for a stronger link to how masking imperial overreach works. The obedience of soldiers as well as the compliance of the American public (for empire-building expeditions) is contingent on the smoothing out of military masculinity contradictions, according to Belkin. However, this argument remains underdeveloped because it is limited to this one case study: the US military has personnel in over 140 countries after all.

Another critique regards the selection of data. Perhaps a disciplinary-based criticism, but I was often unclear on how data and evidence were chosen. The evidence selected at times feels erratic because the data spans a hundred years, from numerous places, and various branches of the US military. It is a vast landscape of people, places, times, and levels of analyses. For example, we go from accounts based on fiction written in the 2000's, to casual conversations about life on base in a foreign country more than forty years ago. We learn of penetration and malfeasance occurring from a reporter writing for a popular magazine over a hundred years ago. Belkin states that "*soldiers frequently rape civilian women*" (p.85), but we do not have any sense of the frequency. Such crimes happen, but the reader would benefit from a more clear sense of the rate or scale of these crimes and improprieties. While I grant him that these phenomena are very hard to measure, and getting ahold of such unsavoury data would not necessarily be easy, the lack of specificity takes away from the strength of Belkin's argument.

The second chapter, "Imperial Cruise", is a solid analysis of how marginalized groups like Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Gays and Women have been integral to the construction of military masculinity. One concern is how Belkin underestimates the degree of legitimacy granted to marginalized groups who have now served. He characterizes women and people of colour's choice to serve like a type of false consciousness:

I read these instances when minorities demonstrate loyalty through military service as moments of emulation in which disenfranchised people seek to fulfil a militarized variant of what Fanon refers to as the dream of whitening as salvation. (p.74).

But gays and women's recent acceptance through repeal of the "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy in the US and the recent change in women in combat policy, is in part a product of having already served and sacrificed in military service. The inclusion of blacks in the Union troops during the Civil War, some have argued, lent a degree of legitimacy and recognition to the emancipation proclamation and abolition more generally. I believe we should be more mindful of how this very service also disrupts colonial and racist projects through increased recognition and legitimacy.

As much as I appreciated Belkin's emphasis on the clean/filthy dichotomy within US military masculinity, the issue of health needs further analysis. Disease was the number one killer of soldiers until relatively recently and the reality of this health scourge is glossed over in the book's fastidious documentation of the military's obsession with hygiene. While the contradiction of filth and cleanliness is a significant and rather unique observation about military masculinity, I believe the argument would be stronger had the author fully contextualized the relationship between cleanliness and disease. Furthermore, while I have no trouble believing that US service members have "*often had little control over their bowels*" (p.138), I was no more convinced of the argument because of his detailing decades of diarrhoea. The military emphasizes cleanliness because, in part, hygiene affects health and readiness, not solely because the ideals of masculinity align so closely with purity and order.

One claim that I found curious was regarding American troops' identity and suffering. It is true that...

in comparison to most of the world's inhabitants, in particular residents of some countries occupied or bombed by American forces or ruled by US-supported dictators, white male American service members are not an underprivileged class (p.176).

Readers are probably aware of this – and importantly this global comparison means that virtually *no one* in America is part of an under-privileged class – but I do not believe it is productive to rate or rank degrees of suffering. I wholeheartedly agree that the "*rhetoric about the suffering of [US] troops tends to elide militarists' role in opting for wars that produce it*", but American soldiers suffer in different ways; importantly, it has little to do with any "*willingness to become victims*" (p.176).

While reading I could not help but consider additional contradictions of military masculinity that are omitted from Belkin's analysis. One fundamental contradiction is the emphasis on bonding, or "unit cohesion", in the midst of the military's outright exhortation for stoicism and rationality. Solidarity among troops is conditioned and a larger objective of the

institution, a reality which Belkin mentions but does not make central. “*No man left behind*”, “*army of one*”, and “*battle buddies*” are emblematic of the military’s indoctrination towards collectivism and support for one another. This solidarity often becomes a type of love for one another, especially when facing the survival and sacrifice inherent in dire lethal circumstances like warfare. Such ‘bonding’, labelled ‘love’ in almost every other context, runs in direct contrast with the demand for non-relational stoicism. Stoicism is a necessity in the midst of enduring and conducting violence. But the two demands are opposing forces which make for a unique contradiction that is highly pronounced within the military. How does an individual manage and navigate the deep love for another person when the expression of emotions is discouraged, if not outright penalized? How does one grieve, mourn, and care for other men when the expression of outright love is taboo? What are the implications of this bind?

Another paradox central to military masculinity yet left unaddressed in the book is the demand for violence from people who are not inherently violent. Despite the widely shared sentiment that men are more violent than women, there is little evidence supporting that other commonly held notion that men are *naturally* violent. The military is therefore in the business of getting people proficient in violence when they are not inclined that way. This is often overlooked in both military and gender studies because the characterization of men as inherently violent fits many ideological and political agendas. However, if men are not inclined towards violence by nature, the military therefore has the tall task of demanding behaviour from people whose instincts run in opposition to the exhortations of the institution. The military remains committed to narratives which suggest that male soldiers, while not necessarily enjoying the experience of killing *per se*, are able to manage this contradiction. With proper training, soldiers can become experts in the application of violence. Now, surely, there are a small proportion of people who can easily learn, develop, and adopt this disposition or ‘skill’, but for most this is a dissonant adaptation requiring considerable disciplining and indoctrination (e.g. ritualized dehumanization of the enemy). In my research,<sup>2</sup> I sometimes hear of soldiers whose stories frustrate the larger military (and masculinity) narrative. Occasionally, there are moments when soldiers drop their weapons and refuse to fight. For whatever reason, they cannot do the violence of war and they refuse to conduct it even in the middle of battle. They rebel against the very violence that is taken as ordinary and natural. Importantly, we rarely hear such stories as they serve neither the military nor the conventional narrative about masculinity itself. I believe they are not as rare as we are led to believe. How is this contradiction smoothed out, if at all, and what are the consequences?

Along similar lines, within military masculinity there is the tension between invulnerability and vulnerability. As much as the US military would like to represent its soldiers as brave men who are tough and invulnerable, the institution is having trouble maintaining this myth in the face of overwhelming evidence showing the mental health consequences of war.

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<sup>2</sup> *Loc.cit.*

(According to a 2012 Institute of Medicine report, nearly one in five American service members serving in Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from longer-term psychic wounds like major depression or post-traumatic stress disorder). Many efforts are being made, but the fact is that war is not good for mental health, and resilience training is not yet able to ‘fix’ soldiers who suffer from the horrors of war. The emphasis placed on invulnerability places deployed soldiers in a powerful bind: they are exposed to violence and hardship, often encountering situations that most people consider traumatic ; yet they are also penalized for expressing such struggling with hardship. This begs the question ‘can we care (even express sympathy) for and treat soldiers who struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder without highlighting soldiers’ ‘weakness’ (i.e., humanity) and the military’s flaws’?

This very tension between vulnerability and invulnerability is evident in how guilt and shame profoundly shape so many of the veterans’ lives. (Of course, many sufferers of trauma, be it sexual or otherwise, also contend with some form of these same emotions as they sort out their identities and traumatic experiences). While gendered shame is briefly mentioned in the first chapter, it is not treated with a sustained analysis. The contradictory tension is even evident for example, in some of the rape survivors whom Belkin speaks with; he notes that male rape victims waited years, in some cases decades, to inform the Veterans Administration of this malfeasance.

In sum, the book adds crucial insights to the understanding of gender and the military. Since the US military is commonly considered quintessentially masculine, and because it has such dominance over domestic and global affairs, we benefit from this thorough examination of the topic. Future analyses of the US military, regardless of discipline, must engage with the significance and implications of Aaron Belkin’s *Bring Me Men*.

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