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Feminism's Assumptions Upended

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South Central Review

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 24, Number 1, Spring 2007

pp. 170-173

10.1353/scr.2007.0007

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Feminism's Assumptions Upended

Barbara Ehrenreich (bio)

Even people whom we might have thought were impervious to shame, like the Secretary of Defense, admit that the photos of prisoner abuse in Abu Ghraib turned their stomachs. The photos did something else to

me, as a feminist: they broke my heart. I had no illusions about the US mission in Iraq, whatever exactly it is, but it turns out that I did have some illusions about women.

Of the seven US soldiers now charged with sickening forms of abuse in Abu Ghraib, three are women: Pfc. Lynndie England, Specialist Sabrina Harman, and Specialist Megan Ambuhl. It was Harman whom we saw smiling an impish little smile and giving the thumbs sign from behind a pile of naked Iraqi men—as if to say, "Hi mom, here I am in Abu Ghraib!" We've gone from the banality of evil . . . to the cuteness of evil.

It was England we saw dragging a naked Iraqi man on a leash. If you were doing PR for al Qaeda, you couldn't have staged a better picture to galvanize misogynist Islamic fundamentalists around the world. Here, in these photos from Abu Ghraib, you have everything that the Islamic fundamentalists believe characterizes Western culture, all nicely arranged in one hideous image—imperial arrogance, sexual depravity . . . and gender equality.

Maybe I shouldn't have been so shocked.

We know that good people can do terrible things under the right circumstances. This is what psychologist Stanley Milgram found in his famous experiments in the 1960s, which found most people willing to follow orders and deliver what they believed were painful electric shocks to others. In all likelihood, England, Harman and Ambuhl are not congenitally evil people. They are working class women who wanted an education and knew that the military could be a stepping stone in that direction. Once they got in, they wanted to fit in.

And I shouldn't be surprised either because I never believed that women are innately gentler and less aggressive than men. I have argued this repeatedly—once with the famously macho anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon. When he kept insisting that women were psychologically incapable of combat, I answered him the best way I could: I asked him if he wanted to step outside . . . **[End Page 170]**

Like most feminists, I have supported full opportunity for women within the military—one, because I knew women could fight, and, two, because the military is one of the few options around for low-income young people. Although I opposed the first Gulf War in 1991, I was proud of our servicewomen and delighted that their presence irked their Saudi hosts. Secretly, I hoped that the presence of women would eventually change the military, making it more respectful of other people and cultures, more capable of genuine peacekeeping.

That's what I thought, but I don't think that any more.

A lot of things died with those photos. One of them was the last justification for the war with Iraq. First, the justification was the weapons of mass destruction. Then it was the supposed links between Saddam and Osama bin Laden—those links were never discovered either. So the final justification was that we had removed an evil dictator who tortured his own people. As late as April 30—two days after the photos surfaced—George Bush was exulting that the torture chambers of Iraq were no longer operating.

Well, it turns out they were just operating under different management. We didn't displace Saddam Hussein; we simply replaced him.

And when you throw in the similar abuses in Afghanistan and Guantánamo, in immigrant detention centers and US prisons, you see that we have created a spreading regime of torture—an empire of pain.

But there's another thing that died for me in the last couple of weeks—a certain kind of feminism or, perhaps I should say, a certain kind of feminist naiveté.

It was a kind of feminism that saw men as the perpetual perpetrators, women as the perpetual victims, and male sexual violence against women as the root of all injustice. Maybe this form of feminism made more sense in...

Feminism's Assumptions Upended

Barbara Ehrenreich

(Originally published May 16, 2004 in the Los Angeles Times)

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South Central Review 24.1 (Spring 2007): 170–173.

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