

## Chapter 3

### SEX, BLOOD, AND DEGRADATION: THE WOMEN OF GITMO

*While there are plenty of good reasons to keep Gitmo open – we need some place to hold suspected terrorists, after all – cleaning house seems an excellent idea. Let’s begin by getting rid of the women.<sup>1</sup>*

Almost as soon as the United States began its military campaign in Afghanistan, a dilemma arose about what to do with the prisoners that had been captured on the battlefield or turned over to U.S. forces as part of a bounty policy.<sup>2</sup> Security was an issue, as Afghanistan was an active war zone. In the end, the decision was made that the U.S. base near the southeastern tip of Cuba would serve as an interim holding facility until it could be determined what would be done with the prisoners. Guantánamo Bay, U.S. Naval Station GTMO (commonly referred to as “Gitmo”), was not ideal; it had neither housing infrastructure nor the personnel to support the influx of hundreds of prisoners. It also bears the distinction of being the only U.S. base occupying space in a hostile country with which the U.S. has no diplomatic relations.<sup>3</sup> But Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld declared it to be the “least worst place” for the detainees.<sup>4</sup> The first of the “detainees”<sup>5</sup> arrived on January 11, 2002 at Camp X-Ray where they were “housed in open-air cages with concrete floors” until more permanent facilities could be

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<sup>1</sup> “Iraqis Demonstrate What Torture Is,” *Sentinel & Enterprise* (Fitchburg, MA), June 24, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> John Mintz, “Lawyer: Most Cuba Detainees Not Terrorists,” *Washington Post*, June 2, 2002, Final Edition, A11.

<sup>3</sup> Gitmo was leased from Cuba in 1903, and a 1934 treaty affirmed the lease. The lease cannot be terminated without the agreement of both the U.S. and Cuba. The U.S. pays the Castro regime \$4,085 a year for the land, and Castro refuses to cash the checks. See Theodore K. Mason, *Across the Cactus Curtain: The Story of Guantánamo Bay* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> George Edmonson, “Preparing Guantánamo: Base Bracing for ‘Worst’ Terror Cases,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 8, 2002, Home Edition, 1A.

<sup>5</sup> The Bush administration steadfastly refused to call them “prisoners,” and determined that they were not prisoners of war, thus not deserving of Geneva Convention protections. See Ron Hutcheson, “Bush Affirms Stance on Detainees,” *San Jose Mercury News*, January 29, 2002, Morning Final Edition, 4A.

constructed.<sup>6</sup> By April, 2002, construction was completed on a 410-bed facility called Camp Delta, and the numbers of detainees rapidly increased, peaking at 680 in 2003.

Rumors of prisoner mistreatment began almost immediately after their arrival, and were soon bolstered by statements from the International Red Cross noting “deterioration in the psychological health of a large number of detainees.”<sup>7</sup> The swirling rumors received massive press attention after the early 2005 release of an FBI report, a Pentagon investigation, and a preview of a tell-all book by a military linguist who had been posted at Gitmo in 2002-2003. In his book, *Inside the Wire*, Erik Saar gives details about the interrogations he witnessed and participated in as a translator. Although Saar reports witnessing abusive women *and men*, as well as women interrogators who behaved professionally and showed respect for the detainees, it is the chapter of his book detailing women engaging in sexualized interrogations that received the most press attention. The FBI and Pentagon reports also discuss interrogators of both sexes engaging in abusive tactics, but the actions of the women interrogators – especially when these were sexualized tactics – overshadow the amount of media coverage given to the often extremely violent actions of male interrogators.

The reports of prisoner abuse came only months after the photographs from the Iraqi prison of Abu Ghraib had achieved worldwide release. Unlike the Abu Ghraib case, there were no accompanying photographs of abuse to feed the story, but like Abu Ghraib, there was a seamy sexual element to the abuse charges. As media news sources reported, women were implicated in the abuse scandal, and were alleged to have performed sexualized interrogations at Gitmo. The interrogations included such things as women wearing tight and/or revealing clothing while questioning Arab prisoners. There were also reports of women inappropriately touching the men

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<sup>6</sup> “Guantanamo Bay Timeline,” *Washington Post*, January 11, 2007, <http://projects.washingtonpost.com/guantanamo/timeline/>

<sup>7</sup> “Guantanamo Bay Timeline.”

and rubbing their bodies suggestively against the restrained prisoners. In perhaps the most excessive violation of Muslim precepts, there were several confirmed reports of women interrogators smearing fake (and, reported in some cases, real) menstrual blood on the prisoners. The prisoners were then not given access to water with which to wash off what they thought was blood, thereby rendering them too unclean for prayer. This was, of course, the point of this particular tactic – to hinder the prisoners’ ability to regain emotional and psychological strength through prayer.<sup>8</sup>

Predictably, with the involvement of women in the reports of abuse at Gitmo, the fact that women had also been involved in the Abu Ghraib scandal was recycled in several media narratives. In this chapter, I will explore some of the similarities, and several of the striking differences, in media coverage of the women of Gitmo and Abu Ghraib. As the women of Abu Ghraib were made highly visible and embodied in media discourses, so too were the women interrogators at Gitmo. However, in continuation of the pattern established at Abu Ghraib, male interrogators and soldiers, also reported to have abused prisoners at Gitmo, remained disembodied. The sexual presence of the women was highlighted by vivid descriptions of the tools of their “trade”, namely, their bodies – breasts, genitalia, and menstrual blood. Like the women of Abu Ghraib, the women of Gitmo were portrayed as wielding dangerous, disruptive female sexuality, suggestive of loose personal morals, to the point that some commentators analogized the women interrogators to sex workers.

Media reporting on Abu Ghraib and Gitmo also differed in several significant ways. One such media narrative concerns the ways in which conservative media analysts reacted to Gitmo. Where several vocal conservative pundits upbraided the women of Abu Ghraib for their

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<sup>8</sup> Erik Saar and Viveca Novak, *Inside the Wire: A Military Intelligence Soldier's Eyewitness Account of Life at Guantánamo* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 225.

behavior, the women of Gitmo were not similarly castigated. Rather, much conservative commentary focused on the perceived erotic aspects of the interrogations and minimized their potential as abuse. The women are portrayed as behaving properly, even on those occasions where their actions are simultaneously compared to that of sex workers.

A second key way in which media coverage of Abu Ghraib differed from Gitmo concerns the ways in which the women of Abu Ghraib were pathologized. There, effort was expended to discover the deviant backgrounds of the women that might subsequently explain their despicable behavior. Not so with the women of Gitmo. Here, mainstream and liberal media argued that the sexual interrogations the women engaged in, whether or not they were voluntary, placed the women at risk of emotional damage. I explore a case study of a U.S. run prison facility in Afghanistan to illuminate my thesis that media discourses show little concern for the emotional well-being of men who engage in violent torture while showing excessive concern for women who engage in sexual torture. This disparity suggests that engaging in violent torture is less traumatic to male perpetrators than sexual abuse is to female perpetrators, and as such presents less of a problem for those perpetrators who eventually re-enter civilian society.

Finally, I will explore the women of Gitmo's use of menstrual blood in interrogations – something that was not reported to have occurred at Abu Ghraib. By examining Judeo-Christian and Islamic cultural perceptions of menstrual blood, I suggest that the reaction of Western media was in keeping with the concurrence across cultures of the view of this blood as particularly polluted. As such, its use is uniquely “productive” against Muslim male prisoners whose worldview assigns it a place of shame and uncleanness. Its use as part of military strategy is also an affront to “pure,” typically male, blood offered in sacrifice on battlefields. The media and public reaction to the use of this blood also serves to emphasize the culturally consecrated value

given to male blood generally, and the low regard to which female blood is held. From the male infant blood-letting ritual of circumcision, common across cultures, to the symbolic value afforded to male warrior blood, to the unique Christian understanding of the unparalleled value of Christ's blood, male blood has reserved a sacred space in the ideologies now squaring off in the war on terrorism. And this blood, I will argue, is a necessary component in the construction of the masculine warrior hero capable of prevailing against the new "evil" enemy.

In the next section, I begin the discussion of the ways in which the reporting of the women of Gitmo in many ways repeated and reinforced the reporting of the women of Abu Ghraib. Through discourses that portrayed these women as visible and embodied, despite the lack of photographs, they are assigned a vivid presence at Gitmo that by comparison makes the male interrogators and soldiers fade into invisibility. In addition, like the women of Abu Ghraib, discourses portray the women interrogators of Gitmo as recklessly using a weapon that causes a great deal of societal angst, namely, their sexuality.

#### Visible, Embodied Women: The "Sex-up" Approach

Perhaps it was inevitable that when rumors were confirmed that women military personnel had been involved in sexual torture at Gitmo, the fact that women were also involved in Abu Ghraib would infiltrate media narratives and serve as a link between the two stories. The circumstances behind the stories were not completely similar. Abu Ghraib prison was in the middle of a war zone, Gitmo was completely under U.S. military control. The soldiers implicated at Abu Ghraib were military police and low-level soldiers who played no active part in interrogations, whereas the military personnel implicated at Gitmo were professional interrogators whose business was the questioning of detainees. Still, there were similarities. Chiefly, prisoners were being abused in ways that seemed designed specifically for the

humiliation of strict Muslims. Further, reports in both cases claimed that the abuses were suggestive of a U.S. policy of torture – something the Bush administration had been heatedly denying. But the similarity that captured much of the media attention was that women were actively involved as abusers in both cases.

AP reporter, Paisley Dodds, who wrote extensively on the emerging story of women interrogators at Gitmo made a point of reminding readers that in the Abu Ghraib scandal, “Several female troops have been charged.”<sup>9</sup> Implicit in the comment is that, with the implication of women involved in torture at Gitmo, a pattern – begun at Abu Ghraib – had emerged. Despite the fact that many more male troops were ultimately charged in the Abu Ghraib scandal than were female troops, Dodds focus on the women soldiers suggests that Abu Ghraib was uniquely a problem of females. A similar tone is present in an article in the *Washington Post* that reports on detainees’ accusations of abuse by female interrogators. On the one hand, the article portrays the sexual interrogations as “part of the fabric of Guantánamo interrogations,”<sup>10</sup> suggesting that these tactics are part of a systemic problem rather than the invention of individual interrogators. But then the writers remind readers that photos from Abu Ghraib “showed a servicewoman there holding naked prisoners on a leash and posing next to a pile of naked prisoners.” Like the Dodds’ piece, this statement omits key information, namely, that the naked pyramid photographs that were made public show servicewomen as well as *servicemen*. Framing the story of abuse at Gitmo in such a way as to draw attention to the sex of some of the perpetrators, and linking the story to Abu Ghraib, makes the sex of the women integral to both stories. Indeed, the revelation

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<sup>9</sup> Paisley Dodds, “Report Details Sexual Tactics Used by Female Interrogators,” *Ventura County Star*, January 30, 2005, 16.

<sup>10</sup> Carol D. Leonnig and Dana Priest, “Detainees Accuse Female Interrogators,” *Washington Post*, February 10, 2005, Final Edition, A01.

of torture at Gitmo and at Abu Ghraib, as well as other prisons in Iraq<sup>11</sup> and Afghanistan<sup>12</sup>, is not chiefly structured so as to suggest a pattern of U.S. military torture of prisoners. Rather, the revelation of torture at Gitmo is portrayed as the continuation of a pattern of *women* torturers begun at Abu Ghraib.

As was true in media coverage of Abu Ghraib was also true in the coverage of Gitmo: Media accounts that discuss torture when women are perpetrators rarely fail to draw attention to their identification as women. This is true not just when the offense under discussion is sexualized torture. It seems that no matter what the allegation, the sex of the interrogator, *when the interrogator is a woman*, is worthy of mention in the story. For example, in a report about duplicitous interrogators who lied to detainees about their lawyers, a case is related about a “female interrogator” who had taken a book from a detainee. This same “female interrogator” had told the detainee not to trust his lawyers because his “lawyers are Jews.”<sup>13</sup> How this interrogator’s sex is relevant to the story is left for readers to determine.

Another example of highlighting the sex of women interrogators even in cases that do not involve sexual conduct can be found in a story that reports on alleged improvement in conditions at Gitmo. Here it is reported that, in an innovative approach to breaking a detainee, a “female interrogator” read “a *Harry Potter* book aloud for hours.”<sup>14</sup> Again, readers are left to fill in the enthymematic blank left by the revelation of the interrogator’s sex. Certainly her technique differs dramatically from those ungendered interrogators who wrapped a detainee’s head in duct

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<sup>11</sup> Neil A. Lewis, “A.C.L.U. Presents Accusations of Serious Abuse of Iraqi Civilians,” *New York Times*, January 25, 2005, Late Edition Final, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Tim Golden, “In US Report, Brutal Details of 2 Afghan Inmates’ Deaths,” *New York Times*, May 20, 2005, Late Edition Final, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Frank Davies, “US Interrogators Accused of Trying to Divide Detainees, Attorneys,” *Knight Ridder Washington Bureau*, May 13, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Liz Sidoti, “Lawmakers: Guantanamo Conditions Improve,” *Associated Press*, June 26, 2005.

tape “because he would not stop chanting passages from the Koran.”<sup>15</sup> They also differ from those ungendered “interrogators” who tormented the so-called 20<sup>th</sup> hijacker at Guantánamo Bay with dripping water (also known as water-boarding), sleep deprivation, ceaseless pop music, shaving his head and face, forcing him to urinate in his pants, and strip-searching him.<sup>16</sup>

Somehow, the gender of the interrogator who lied to detainees, and who read *Harry Potter* to the detainee, is salient to the stories, whereas the gender of those who violently assault detainees is irrelevant.

If the sex of women interrogators in the above, fairly innocuous, cases became key to their respective stories, this was even more the case with stories reporting sexual torture employed in interrogations. These were not simply abusive interrogators; these were abusive *female* interrogators, with breasts, hips, and genitalia which they used against their male prisoners. There was even an intelligence moniker assigned to their methods – it was called the “sex-up” approach.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the argument can be made that when reporting on sexual abuses it is necessary to note physical features of the women who are the alleged abusers as it is those very physical features that are used as vehicles for abuse. However, violent torture, like sexual torture, is an extremely physical act involving bodies impacting other bodies. Nonetheless, reports of the male military personnel who engage in it omit descriptive language of the physicality of the acts. Put differently, reports do not dwell on *masculine* fists hitting faces and bodies, or chokeholds applied by *muscled* arms, or powerful *male* feet or knees kicking or kneeling subdued prisoners, or *male* bodies wrestling other *male* bodies to the floor. It is as if the perpetrators in these cases are disembodied phantoms, whereas the sexual interrogations are

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<sup>15</sup> Neil A. Lewis, “FBI Memos Criticized Practices at Guantanamo,” *New York Times*, December 7, 2004, Late Edition Final, 19.

<sup>16</sup> James Gordon Meek and Tracy Connor, “Hard-Line Grilling or Torture?” *Daily News* (New York), June 13, 2005, Final Edition, 8.

<sup>17</sup> “Iraqis Demonstrate Torture.”



perpetrated by flesh and blood, fully embodied, women. This contrast serves to demonstrate a point made by Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price: “[W]omen just are their bodies in a way that men are not.”<sup>18</sup>

Photographs from Abu Ghraib provided pictorial evidence of women involved in sexual torture, and the stories accompanying the photographs supplemented them by focusing attention on the women soldiers captured on film. Words in the articles draw the viewer’s attention to Lynndie England’s “tight, muscular body and that don’t-mess-with-me expression,”<sup>19</sup> and Sabrina Harman’s “angel’s face.”<sup>20</sup> But the story of women at Gitmo arrived without visual aids. Without photographs, the story fails to achieve the level of public spectacle that was the case for the Abu Ghraib story. Rather, the workings of Gitmo remained shrouded in secrecy, and the story had some level of official containment. Absent photographs, news narratives did the work to provide colorful verbal pictures of the women interrogators at work.

Many of the reports of the women at Gitmo focused in on the tight T-shirts, lacy bras and panties, and thong underwear that were reported to be part of the seductive uniform of some of the abusive interrogators. There were also reports of the women touching their breasts and rubbing them against the prisoners,<sup>21</sup> and reports of women straddling restrained detainees<sup>22</sup> and in some cases giving them improvised lap dances.<sup>23</sup> The discourse of the female interrogators sketches a portrait of immensely potent female sexuality. An article in the *Kansas City Star* serves as an example in its portrayal of a female interrogator at Gitmo ready to unleash her

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<sup>18</sup> Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price, “Openings on the Body,” in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, ed. Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price (New York: Routledge, 1999), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Rebecca Nappi, “Photos Shatter Assumptions About Women,” *Spokesman Review*, May 8, 2004, Spokane Edition, B1.

<sup>20</sup> Joe Eaton, “Sabrina Harman,” *Roanoke Times*, May 26, 2005, Metro Edition, A1.

<sup>21</sup> Marie Cocco, “The Right Questions About Abu Ghraib,” *Times Union*, May 25, 2005, 3 Edition, A9.

<sup>22</sup> Bob Dart, “Report: ‘Degrading and Abusive Treatment’ but No Torture at Gitmo,” *Cox News Service*, July 13, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> “The Women of Gitmo,” *New York Times*, July 15, 2005, Late Edition Final, 18.

“dangerous” sexuality. A lawyer for a detainee reports on a trip to Gitmo to see his client. While at the base, he and his military escort went to a sandwich shop, and there his escort “noted that an interrogator was at a nearby table. ‘There was a man in uniform and a very voluptuous, platinum blond woman in tight clothing,’ Sullivan said. ‘I asked my escort, “The man’s an interrogator?” And my escort said, “No, the woman.”’”<sup>24</sup> The account ends here, apparently with no explanation needed. The woman, “voluptuous” and “platinum blond” is understood to personify sexuality. She may be a professional interrogator, but the implication is that she has a powerful and destructive weapon in her arsenal: her predatory sexual allure. Her very presence, juxtaposed to a properly uniformed man, suggests something incongruent. Her voluptuousness, coupled with her stereotypical porn-star hair color and tight clothes, make her automatically suspect without further commentary necessary. The military female body, perhaps normally safely contained under an androgynous BDU (battle dress uniform), had escaped its confinement and was ready to wreak havoc at Gitmo. Other reports of women interrogators describe the havoc: The uncontained female bodies had goaded a reaction from some of the male prisoners, in essence, forcing their own desires to betray them. Several news reports tell of women who “taunted [the prisoners] for getting erections,”<sup>25</sup> or who were “commenting” on erections.<sup>26</sup>

The media accounts of the sexualized interrogations of male detainees by female interrogators provide evidence for what feminist theorists have noted for decades, namely, women are *always female* first.<sup>27</sup> After they have been properly labeled as female, they can then be read as interrogators, soldiers, or civilian contractors. But they must first be understood through the modifying frame of their sexual and gendered positionality before their acts can be

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<sup>24</sup> Rick Montgomery, “Lawyers Cast Light inside Gitmo,” *Kansas City Star*, March 29, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Jamie Tobias Neely, “Guantanamo Bay’s Latest Tactics Damage Us All,” *Spokesman Review*, February 6, 2005, Idaho Edition, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Dodds.

<sup>27</sup> See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). See also Shildrick and Price.

comprehended and judged. For the women at Gitmo, once they were identified and embodied, they could then be interpreted through a gendered lens as sexually suspect women. As Lynndie England's actions at Abu Ghraib were partially explained by her propensity to stray from her own bed,<sup>28</sup> light is shed upon the actions of Gitmo's women interrogators by their portrayal as sexual outlaws who use their bodies as weapons against their strict Muslim captives.

As women, the abusive Gitmo interrogators are highly visible in media reports. The word "interrogator" is modified by "female" or "woman" in every sentence that reports on sexual abuse of Arab detainees. In some instances, it is not just that the perpetrator is female, but that the abuse tactic itself is female or feminine, as is suggested in a report from the *Ventura County Star* that referred to "abusive female interrogation tactics."<sup>29</sup> In an ironic twist, the implication seems to be that sexual abuse in an interrogation room is a distinctly *female* tactic. This is an especially interesting categorization in light of reports that male interrogators also engaged in sexualized interrogations. The difference is that their behavior is not the focus of any of the articles where it is mentioned. In fact, usually the sexual behavior of the male interrogators warrants no more than a sentence in an entire article, and generates little editorial follow-up. The *Washington Post*, for example, notes that one prisoner claims to have been "touched sexually" by male guards.<sup>30</sup> An editorial in another newspaper did not even give the male interrogators a full sentence. Rather, in a dependent clause, the paper reports that Mohamed al-Kahtani, the alleged 20<sup>th</sup> hijacker, "was forced to dance with a man," in addition to other humiliations.<sup>31</sup> The *Post* reports in a few short sentences about a prisoner being "threatened with rape by male

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<sup>28</sup> Jay Price, "Abuse Suspect Flouted Orders," *News and Observer* (Raleigh, North Carolina), August 5, 2004, Final Edition, A1.

<sup>29</sup> Dodds.

<sup>30</sup> Dan Eggen and Josh White, "Inmates Alleged Koran Abuse," *Washington Post*, May 26, 2005, Final Edition, A01.

<sup>31</sup> "See No Evil," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 15, 2005.

interrogators.”<sup>32</sup> It is unclear from this sentence who would be raping the prisoner, male or female. There are no accompanying details and the story quickly returns to “a female soldier” in a tight T-shirt sexually taunting a prisoner. A search of news databases will not reveal an article entitled “The *Men* of Gitmo,” or “Detainees Accuse *Male* Interrogators,” or “Report Details Sexual Tactics Used by *Male* Interrogators,” or “Torture *Guys* Gone Wild.” But replace the italicized words with “women,” “female,” “female,” and “chicks” respectively, and stories will be found detailing the sexual interrogations performed by women interrogators at the Cuban base.

The intense focus on the sex of the women interrogators, along with detailed descriptions of their unscrupulous methods, portrays these women as in possession of a particularly dangerous weapon – one that they are perhaps not capable of handling, namely, their sexuality. Views of female sexuality as dangerous and in need of constraint pre-date both Abu Ghraib and Gitmo and have long existed in Western cultures. Why dangerous? Chiefly, because it arouses male sexual desire. As Carole S. Vance argues, our cultural “rag-bag of myths and folk knowledge” depicts “male lust as intrinsic, uncontrollable, and easily aroused by any show of female sexuality and desire.”<sup>33</sup> If female sexuality “triggers male attack, it cannot be freely or spontaneously shown, either in public or in private.”<sup>34</sup> Suzanne E. Hatty adds that it is not just women who are in danger from uncontrollable male sexual desire, it is men themselves. Hatty notes that,

sexual desire, once aroused, may interfere with rational functioning; self-control may be undermined and irrational actions ensue. Women, therefore, possess the capacity to draw

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<sup>32</sup> Leonnig and Priest.

<sup>33</sup> Carole S. Vance, “Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 3.

<sup>34</sup> Vance, 3.

men closer to the outer boundaries of masculine subjectivity, and may even entice them over the edge into the abyss of the unreal.<sup>35</sup>

With so much on the line when female sexuality is not under specific (male) control, the solution historically has been to constrain it. The most common method of constraint has been to socially confine the expression of female sexuality within the bounds of traditional, monogamous relationships, preferably heterosexual marriage.<sup>36</sup> When women step outside of this monogamous heterosexual boundary, and especially if they should achieve some kind of notoriety in the process, they are likely to have their actions further scrutinized for their sexual transgressions. Lynndie England's behavior at Abu Ghraib is a prime example of this. As I noted in the previous chapter, she was consistently vilified in media reports for her actions caught on film *and* for her sexually permissive off-camera behavior. The latter exacerbated the former making her, deservedly or not, a representative for what went wrong at Abu Ghraib. Should a woman be perceived as using sex as a tool, as is suggested by some media accounts of the women at Gitmo, the implication is that she is cold and calculating and demonstrating aberrant behavior. As Linda LeMoncheck notes, in the Christian tradition upon which most of Western culture is based, "It is the threatening, unscrupulous, manipulative woman who would use her passive allure to 'get men where she wants them.'"<sup>37</sup>

Some media reports about the women interrogators at Gitmo describe them flaunting their intoxicating sexuality, using it as a tool with which to bludgeon their helpless victims. For example, the *Washington Post* reports that "female interrogators repeatedly used sexually suggestive tactics to try to humiliate and pry information from devout Muslim men" held at

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<sup>35</sup> Suzanne E. Hatty, *Masculinities, Violence, and Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2000), 19.

<sup>36</sup> Vance, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Linda LeMoncheck, *Dehumanizing Women* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985), 89.

Gitmo.<sup>38</sup> This report seems to suggest that the interrogators had a two pronged goal: to humiliate *and* to pry information from the detainees. This same article reports that “female interrogators regularly violated Muslim taboos about sex and contact with women,” and that one “paraded around in a tight T-shirt” to cause a detainee distress. This active female sexual agency is contrasted in this article with sentences constructed to hide the agents behind violent tactics used on detainees, agents who are presumably male soldiers and interrogators. For example, the article recounts a case in which “three women in lacy bras and panties strutted into the interrogation room” where a detainee was chained. They then “cooed” over the detainee’s attractiveness and made suggestive remarks to him. When this failed to spark a reaction from the prisoner, “one woman sat on his lap, another rubbed her breasts against his back and massaged his chest and a third squatted near his crotch.” The prisoner then tried to resist by head-butting the woman behind him. At this, “all three ran out and a team of soldiers stormed in and beat him.”

If the account is true, the prisoner’s experience is certainly a violation of Muslim codes of modesty between the sexes and blatant sexual abuse. Interestingly, while the women are portrayed as connivingly using their sexuality as a club to flog a helpless man, the “team of soldiers” who violently beat him is described in gender neutral terms. One can assume that the soldiers who carried out such overtly violent actions were men, but there is no need to assume anything with regard to the women interrogators. Readers are told that they are female, they wear lacy undergarments, and they parade around, coo, and strut. Their actions are described in lightly veiled condemnatory language, while the actions of the presumably male soldiers are reported without added commentary.

Unlike the male soldiers and interrogators whose characters rarely seem to raise suspicion, the misdeeds of women soldiers and interrogators are reported on with acrimony. As

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<sup>38</sup> Leonnig and Priest.

the article noted above demonstrates, the women are reported as actively using their sexuality as tools against devout Muslims. Another report describes them in disapproving language as “flaunting their sexuality” and using “sexual taunting” during interrogations.<sup>39</sup> This same article reports detainees being “stripped and shackled low to the floor” for hours at a time by no agents in particular. It also reports of copies of the Koran “which had been tossed into a pile and stepped on” by nameless, faceless, and ungendered guards. But when the abusive acts are sexual in nature, and performed by women, the agents are highlighted, such as the “female interrogators” who “forcibly” squeezed male prisoners’ genitalia.<sup>40</sup> Another article reports that “female interrogators” used their bodies “suggestively” against detainees, but that ungendered persons unknown strapped detainees to the floor, wrapped them in Israeli flags, and threatened to transport them to countries with reputations for much worse treatment of prisoners.<sup>41</sup> The reports go beyond detailing what happened at Gitmo and seem to suggest something about the character of the women involved in the sexual interrogations. Again, this is similar to media reporting on Abu Ghraib.

Like the women of Abu Ghraib, the personal morality of the women at Gitmo is repeatedly called into question in media reports about their conduct suggesting that they are using their sexuality because it is an effective tool against Muslim men *and* because these women are themselves sexually suspect. This is in keeping with Western cultural mores which suggest that a woman who engages in sexual behavior outside of the bounds of a monogamous, heterosexual relationship is violating acceptable gender norms. In a common Western trope, women who use sex as a tool to get what they want are likened to prostitutes and porn actresses.

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<sup>39</sup> Neil A. Lewis and Eric Schmitt, “Inquiry Finds Abuses at Guantanamo Bay,” *New York Times*, May 1, 2005, Late Edition Final, 35.

<sup>40</sup> Lewis and Schmitt, “Inquiry Finds Abuses.”

<sup>41</sup> Carol Rosenberg, “3 GI’s Punished for Detainee Abuse Mistreated Inmates,” *Miami Herald*, November 12, 2004, Region Edition, A-11.

LeMoncheck notes that when a woman engages in sex solely as a means to an end, and with someone with whom she is “less than intimate, all the negative connotations of the prostitute – mercenary, unclean, valuable solely in virtue of her sexual instrumentality for others – arise.”<sup>42</sup>

This viewpoint is borne out in a *New York Times* article that attacks the Pentagon for being “utterly unconcerned with the fact that women in uniform had been turned into sex workers at Guantánamo.”<sup>43</sup> In this comment, the women are not just likened to sex workers, they are in “fact” sex workers. The article also refers to the women as behaving “like trollops.” “It’s like a bad porn movie,” commented Maureen Dowd. “All S and no M.”<sup>44</sup> A lawyer for a detainee was quoted in the *Washington Post* as noting that the actions of the women reminded him “of a pornographic Web site – it’s like the fantasy of all these S&M clubs.”<sup>45</sup> An editorialist compared the reports from Gitmo to “the bizarre sexual aggression of an MTV music video,”<sup>46</sup> while another referred to the women as “our dominatrixes.”<sup>47</sup>

The analogy of sex workers is an illuminating choice. Sex work is rarely viewed as an honorable choice of employment. A woman who engages in this kind of work may be pitied as a victim, but she is more often despised as selling not just her sexual services for money, but selling herself. The analogy works as a rhetorical strategy to belittle the women interrogators, suggesting that they being paid by the U.S. military not for their value as professional intelligence workers, but rather for the sexual services they provide. The ambivalent response on the part of the male prisoners (e.g., the reports that some of them got erections) is not noted in order to excuse the women’s actions by suggesting that the men were willing participants. On the

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<sup>42</sup> LeMoncheck, 49.

<sup>43</sup> “The Women of Gitmo.”

<sup>44</sup> Maureen Dowd, “Torture Chicks Gone Wild,” *New York Times*, January 30, 2005, Late Edition Final, 17.

<sup>45</sup> Leonnig and Priest.

<sup>46</sup> Neely.

<sup>47</sup> Dimitri Vassilaros, “The Tortured Logic of Mo Dowd,” *Pittsburgh Tribune Review*, February 6, 2005.



contrary, a deeply held belief that Western culture shares with some strains of conservative Islam is that women are responsible for arousing and squelching male sexual response. Vance notes that “Through a culturally dictated chain of reasoning, women become the moral custodians of male behavior, which they are perceived as instigating and eliciting.”<sup>48</sup> While some media reports suggest that there was a conscious intent on the part of the women interrogators to arouse the humiliating lust of the prisoners, Susan Bordo points out that when it comes to male arousal, “Conscious intention...is not a requisite for females to be seen as responsible for the bodily responses of men, aggressive as well as sexual.”<sup>49</sup> The ideologies may seem to be diametrically opposed, but both Western women and those who are part of nations that are ruled by Islamic law (*Shari‘ah*) are placed in the role of “moral custodians of male behavior.” As one Muslim cleric notes:

Islam has taken measures to prohibit practices which would lead to stimulating of sensual passion or to deviation from chastity. Women are therefore ordered not to do what would titillate men’s feelings of lust. She must therefore cover her body, and not show her adornments of beauty or of jewelry or makeup to the outside world or to strangers. She must not frequent, more than absolutely essential, public gatherings attended by men. She must spend much time at home.<sup>50</sup>

Muslim scholar Asma Barlas interprets conservatives’ insistence on veiling women as their perception of women’s bodies being particularly shameful. She notes that conservatives “justify such forms of veiling on the grounds that women’s bodies are pudendal, hence sexually corrupting to those who see them; it thus is necessary to shield Muslim men from viewing

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<sup>48</sup> Vance, 4.

<sup>49</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Tenth Anniversary Edition ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 6.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Ann Elizabeth Mayer, *Islam and Human Rights: Tradition and Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2007), 120.

women's bodies by concealing them."<sup>51</sup> Where Muslim women are often veiled from head to toe and sequestered at home in order not to "titillate men's feelings of lust," Western women of all religious stripes learn from a young age that sexual harassment and rape is often blamed on the victim's behavior – where she goes or what she wears. So the report that some male prisoners had erections is not meant to suggest that they may have been willing participants in sexual activity at Gitmo. Rather, it is reason to judge the women even more harshly. As stewards of male desire, these women's treacherous bodies caused the men to betray themselves.

This insidious cross-cultural view of women's bodies being perpetually sexual bodies demonstrates their inability to ever be perceived as heroic saviors in the fight that Bush describes as "good against evil."<sup>52</sup> Being so bound to their bodies, being so very *earthly*, women are culturally perceived to be always already "tainted." As such, they cannot aspire to be saviors, and certainly not the kind of savior that would be needed to prevail against evil. To be sure, not all men qualify for such a role – and the Abu Ghraib discourses by disparaging the failed male soldiers demonstrated this point. But women, simply by virtue of possessing unruly and earthly bodies are automatically disqualified.

While the media reporting of Gitmo contains some striking similarities to that of Abu Ghraib, there are also some important differences. One difference is the way that conservative media representatives responded to the two stories. Where the women of Abu Ghraib were placed in positions of representation of all women in the military, and were used by conservative voices to raise the issue of the appropriateness of women in the military, the women of Gitmo were not similarly used. In fact, the conservative media is selectively silent regarding the women

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<sup>51</sup> Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women" In Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, Austin, 2002), 54.

<sup>52</sup> Martin Walker, "Bush: Anti-Terror Campaign 'Good Versus Evil'," *United Press International*, September 25, 2001.

of Gitmo, playing down the reports of sexual interrogations while avoiding altogether the issue of the use of menstrual blood as tool of humiliation.

### Selective Silence of the Conservatives

When the story of prisoner torture at Abu Ghraib broke, conservative columnists lost little time in jumping on the media bandwagon that chiefly castigated the women soldiers. The conservative journals the *American Spectator* and the *National Review* laid most of the blame for the women's actions at the door of feminism. The *American Spectator* scolded "the radical feminists" for paving the way for women to enter combat because "[n]ow America needs a conditioning course not on the abuse of American women taken in defeat, but abuse by American female soldiers in victory. The feminists call this progress."<sup>53</sup> Similarly, the *National Review* faulted the "collapse of traditional roles" for the women's "disgraceful behavior."<sup>54</sup> In another article, a writer for the *National Review* brought up an issue of concern to many, not just conservatives, namely, the blight that Abu Ghraib placed on the American military. But this writer was specific in his placement of responsibility: "Thanks to [Lynndie] England and her little band of degenerates, the proud uniform of the U.S. army has been stained, and both the terrorists' and President Bush's political opponents have been handed an unfortunately effective propaganda tool."<sup>55</sup> For this writer, Lynndie England, though not ultimately as harshly punished as several of the men, was placed in a position of leadership for the "band of degenerates" that had embarrassed the American military at Abu Ghraib.

One might expect that, with the revelation of similar egregious acts of abuse at Gitmo, conservative voices would again join the media chorus of disapproval. But this was not the case. Articles did appear in such conservative mainstays as the *Spectator* and the *Review*, but they

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<sup>53</sup> George Neumayr, "Thelma and Louise in Iraq," *American Spectator Online*, May 5, 2004, [www.spectator.org](http://www.spectator.org)

<sup>54</sup> Ann Marlowe, "Shameless," *National Review*, May 21, 2004.

<sup>55</sup> W. Thomas Jr. Smith, "No Excuses," *National Review*, May 14, 2004.

were not condemnatory either of the women interrogators or of feminists. Indeed, even vocal anti-women-in-the-military activists such as Elaine Donnelly and Linda Chavez were oddly silent regarding the entire Gitmo incident. No sustained conservative discourse suggested that what happened at Gitmo was a reason to remove women from the military, or that it was evidence of military women becoming degenerates. So, why the selective silence among conservatives? In order to explore possible answers to this question of missing discourse, it is first necessary to examine the existing discourse.

While many mainstream and liberal media narratives condemned the women at Gitmo for their perceived immorality, conservative commentary generally avoided descriptors such as “trollops” or disparagingly likened their behavior to “sex workers.” In at least one case the behavior of the women who sexually tormented their Arab prisoners was referred to as “a great plan.”<sup>56</sup> In responding to a condemnatory op-ed piece by Maureen Dowd, Dimitri Vassilaros noted that the use of “feminine wiles” on Gitmo detainees was a great plan, “unless the suspects are gay. Or unless our chicks look like Abu Ghraib prison guard Lyndie [*sic*] England.” Vassilaros commented that if any of “our GI Janes” looked “like Demi Moore when she starred in *GI Jane* (or better yet, in *Striptease*),” any “basic red-blooded American” would’ve instantly cooperated in the interrogation. Still, according to Vassilaros, sexual interrogations are “a great plan because terrorists tend to be so uptight about earthly women that they prefer the 72 virgins waiting for them in heaven.”

Vassilaros was not alone in playing down the sexual interrogations. A writer for the *National Review* insisted that they were “no worse than pledging a college fraternity.”<sup>57</sup> Another boastfully referred to his own experiences in military boot camp and suggested that what the

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<sup>56</sup> Vassilaros.

<sup>57</sup> Henry I. Miller, “Reconsidering Gitmo,” *National Review*, July 25, 2005.

detainees endured was nothing by comparison. As for the sexual interrogations, “An American soldier yearns for such ‘intimidation.’”<sup>58</sup> One writer suggested that the sexual interrogations at Gitmo were “[n]ot exactly crimes against humanity. In Las Vegas some men pay thousands to be interrogated like that.”<sup>59</sup> What these commentators have in common is their focus on the overtly sexual aspects of the interrogations to the near exclusion of the menstrual blood tactic. The assumption is that all American soldiers are male, heterosexual, have no qualms about anonymous sex involving bondage and domination, and harbor no set of principles that disallows sex outside of a committed relationship. Indeed, Vasilaros’s passionately macho commentary seems to place only over-sexed heterosexual men in the category of “red-blooded American.”

The exclusive focus on the potentially erotic aspects of the interrogations suggests a number of things about this narrative. First, with the suggestion that American soldiers, indeed, American men, would not only withstand such methods but would welcome them, it is implicit that the Muslim prisoners are lacking the masculinity that American men possess (again, the narratives seem to assume that American soldiers are all male, heterosexual, and promiscuous). The Arab men’s eschewing what any normal “red-blooded” American man would “yearn for” tends to feminize them by comparison. This is certainly in contrast to Saar’s account of his own reaction to having seen an overtly sexual interrogation. Saar, an American soldier who self-identifies as heterosexual, reported feeling so degraded by an interrogation he participated in as a translator that “[t]here wasn’t enough hot water in all of Cuba to make me feel clean.”<sup>60</sup> Saar’s account suggests that perhaps not every “American soldier yearns for such ‘intimidation.’”

A second implication of this focus on the erotic aspects of the interrogations is that by giving a nod of approval to the sexual methods the women at Gitmo used, while excoriating the

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<sup>58</sup> George H. Wittman, “What Could Be Worse Than Gitmo?” *American Spectator*, June 22, 2005.

<sup>59</sup> James Burnham, “Catching Flak for Gitmo,” *Daily Texan*, 17 June 2005.

<sup>60</sup> Saar and Novak, 228.

lowly female soldiers at Abu Ghraib for their usurping their positions and dominating men, the narratives suggest that the actions at Gitmo demonstrate appropriate feminine behavior. Yes, the women interrogators dominated the male prisoners, but as long as their actions could be interpreted as erotic sex games, and as long as they were appropriately attractive, their actions were deemed acceptable for these commentators. They were doing what women could do in service of country, namely, sacrifice their virtue. (After all, conservative commentators have been quite clear that women killing or sacrificing their lives in war is unacceptable.<sup>61</sup>) This narrative is demonstrated by another writer for the *Spectator* who directly addressed the sexual tactics and approved of them. He noted: "I've met a few of these gals, and I can tell you they are smart, tough, and are accomplishing things other people can't...I – and a lot of people who are, fortunately, in control of what they do – approve because they are acting within the rules, and producing results."<sup>62</sup> This writer also approvingly refers to the women as "dedicated professionals."

The above commentator who notes that men pay "thousands" for such sexual attention equates the actions of the Gitmo women to sex workers. But unlike mainstream and liberal media commentators, this is not a disparaging comparison. Unlike the conservative commentator that referred the women of Abu Ghraib as "female barbarians,"<sup>63</sup> these writers do not seem to take exception with military women performing interrogations akin to sex work. A crucial difference in the way that the "gals" at Gitmo were perceived compared to Lynndie England and "her band of degenerates" is that where the Gitmo women are portrayed as professionals, the women of Abu Ghraib are portrayed as reprobates. Articles that reported on Abu Ghraib revealed that one

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<sup>61</sup> See Mary Leonard, "Abuse Raises Gender Issues," *Boston Globe*, May 16, 2004, Third Edition, A17. Here, conservative Linda Chavez makes the point that it is culturally undesirable for women to become combat warriors.

<sup>62</sup> Jed Babbin, "The Gitmo Varsity," *American Spectator Online*, July 18, 2005, [www.spectator.org](http://www.spectator.org)

<sup>63</sup> Neumayr.

of Lynndie England's excuses for her behavior was that it was "just for fun."<sup>64</sup> No reports accompanying the story of the women at Gitmo suggest that they enjoyed what they did. In fact, Saar's account suggests that the women interrogators were often emotionally shaken by what they did. As professionals, the women of Gitmo were doing what was necessary, even if it was dirty, unpleasant business. As appropriately feminine "gals," they are portrayed as doing what they had to do, but there is no suggestion that they enjoyed it.

The selective silence of conservative commentators is just one way that media narratives of Gitmo differ from Abu Ghraib. Another key difference is that the women of Abu Ghraib were often pathologized in media accounts that sought to explain their behavior, where the women of Gitmo are portrayed more as victims of a ruthless military hierarchy. In this paradigm, women are not "naturally" sexual aggressors and are far more likely to be victims of other's sexuality than they are to be in possession of sexual agency. If a woman uses sexuality, say in an interrogation room, the explanation must be that she was forced to do so, because no "normal" woman would ever choose this action. This being the case, the women at Gitmo needed to be rescued either from an unprincipled military chain of command, or they needed to be rescued from their own errant ways. In contrast, there is an absence of media narratives that suggest that men who engage in violent torture in interrogations are put at similar psychic risk.

#### A Tale of Two Prison Camps

As noted, a theme that emerges from media reports about women military abusers at Gitmo that does not appear in discourse about the male abusers, and did not appear in the discourse about the women of Abu Ghraib, is how the women's actions at Gitmo would impact them psychologically. Indeed, editorial after editorial agonized over how women participating in sexual interrogations demeaned and dehumanized their male prisoners *and themselves*. Under

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<sup>64</sup> Alisha Berger, "'Just for Fun' - Lynndie's Sick Abuse Excuse," *New York Post*, August 4, 2004, 5.

this theme, the women interrogators used sexual techniques under duress. But even if the women voluntarily used such methods in interrogations, the cultural understanding of sex being inherently demeaning for women suggests that these women were at psychic risk whether they were aware of it or not.

There is no socially consistent understanding of female sexuality. While it is often portrayed as something socially dangerous and in need of control, it is simultaneously perceived as something that victimizes women themselves. LeMoncheck notes that in Western culture, the traditional assumption regarding women is that “sex is dirty, sinful, or evil.”<sup>65</sup> Where “heterosexual sex is thought by many to turn a mere boy into a respectable, fully developed man,” sex makes women dirty.<sup>66</sup> The pornography debates, for example, sometimes suggest that women are inherently objectified and victimized by sex, and that no woman could willingly consent to participating in the production of porn.<sup>67</sup> A woman who argues that she is a willing participant is sometimes accused of laboring under a false consciousness.

The difference in discourses between Abu Ghraib and Gitmo could be partially explained by the lack of photographs of the abuses perpetrated at Gitmo. The Abu Ghraib photographs make it difficult to believe that the women were anything but cheerful collaborators with the men in the sexual torture and humiliation of the prisoners. They are smiling, giving thumbs up, and at times have their arms linked companionably with their male counterparts. Media discourses interpreting these photographs are that the women had to be *a priori* degenerates who were obviously operating outside of the control of strict military hierarchy. In contrast, with the lack of photographs of Gitmo interrogations, and the lack of explicit pictorial views of the women’s

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<sup>65</sup> LeMoncheck, 48.

<sup>66</sup> LeMoncheck, 49.

<sup>67</sup> See Kathleen Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality: The Global Exploitation of Women* (New York: New York University Press, 1995).



attitudes while carrying out their activities, some of the narratives that spin around the story place them in roles that are socially comfortable for women, namely, the roles of victims. Absent photographs proclaiming the contrary, and combining that absence with Western society's views of proper femininity, it is easy to concoct narratives of the women interrogators following procedures and being under control even if it is granted that those procedures and the chain of command are inherently flawed. At least the women were not inventing these tactics out of whole cloth; they are victims, and thus at risk of being harmed by the actions forced upon them.

The discourses that portray women as helpless sexual tools often imply that there is someone, or something, behind the scenes pulling the strings. One article, while not excusing the behavior of the women at Gitmo, remarks that “no young military reservist could possibly have concocted the strategy of interrogating Muslim men by using religious humiliation and tactics of sexual degradation.”<sup>68</sup> Another article, while simultaneously calling for the removal of all women from Gitmo, suggests that what happened there was the result of a “policy of *using* women to sexually humiliate men”<sup>69</sup> (my emphasis). Most articles that use the “women as tools” rhetoric place the U.S. military and/or the Bush administration in the position of wielder of the tools. One news piece, for example, comments that a military spokesman “wouldn’t address whether the U.S. military had a specific strategy *to use women*” (my emphasis).<sup>70</sup> This article notes that a recent military investigation of interrogation tactics at Gitmo warns “that anyone outside Department of Defense channels should be prepared to address allegations that *women were used* intentionally with Muslim men” (my emphasis).

The Abu Ghraib media discourses, while often insisting that responsible members of the military hierarchy should be sought out and punished, were not quick to suggest that the women

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<sup>68</sup> Cocco.

<sup>69</sup> “Iraqis Demonstrate Torture.”

<sup>70</sup> Dodds.

soldiers were mere pawns. In fact, as I note in the previous chapter, media narratives often went to great lengths to discover a psychological basis that would reduce *women* to performing such actions. Lynndie England was reported to have been a borderline retarded sexual deviant before she ever arrived at Abu Ghraib,<sup>71</sup> and Sabrina Harman brought with her an unhealthy interest in “stomach-churning photography.”<sup>72</sup> For the women at Gitmo, however, no concerted media effort was made to find a psychological flaw that might have impacted their actions. Rather, the concern was directed toward how their actions impacted them psychologically.

An op-ed piece in the *Spokesman Review* condemns the women of Gitmo for their sexual abuse of the detainees, declaring that “sexual assault, always a display of power and aggression, strikes human beings where they are most vulnerable – their sexuality.”<sup>73</sup> The article goes on to argue that such actions degrade all of American society – a common argument in anti-torture editorials, no matter who the perpetrator is, female or male. But the writer goes a step further and states that using sexual tactics “exploits and debases the women.” Similarly, Maureen Dowd in her piece for the *New York Times* berates the women interrogators for using “a toxic combination of sex and religion,” and assails the Bush administration for “allowing its female interrogators” to use sexual techniques in interrogations.<sup>74</sup> “Who are these women?” Dowd asks, clearly suggesting that there is some fundamental deficiency in women who would willingly perform such acts. But the point of her article is that “such behavior degrades the women who are doing it, the men they are doing it to, and the country they are doing it for.” According to this feminist writer, the women may have been acting in service of their country at the behest of some higher authority, but their behavior was causing harm to everyone involved, including themselves.

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<sup>71</sup> Price.

<sup>72</sup> Aly Sujo, “The Ghoul Next Door Was Jail Abuse Fotog,” *New York Post*, May 9, 2004, 4.

<sup>73</sup> Neely.

<sup>74</sup> Dowd.

Likewise, an op-ed piece in the *Miami Herald* states that sexual interrogations performed by women interrogators “debase interrogator and prisoner alike,”<sup>75</sup> and an editorial in the *New York Times* agrees that these methods lower “the humanity of the people who practice it, and the citizens who condone it.”<sup>76</sup>

An underlying assumption in some of the opinion pieces decrying the women’s behavior is that a woman’s presence in an interrogation room will be a sexual presence. An article from the editorial desk of the *New York Times* complained of women behaving like “trollops” and “sex workers” at Gitmo because this was “exploitation and debasement of women serving in the United States military.”<sup>77</sup> “These practices are as degrading to the women as they are to the prisoners,” noted the editorial, so “where are the members of Congress who wring their hands over the issue of women in combat?” One editorialist, while arguing against closing Guantánamo Bay as a solution to the abuse problems there, as some have urged, claims to have a better answer: “Let’s begin by getting rid of the women.”<sup>78</sup> This writer’s assumption is that the very presence of women at Gitmo suggests that the “sex-up” approach will be employed. The author draws upon Saar’s account of at least one woman interrogator using sex as an interrogation tool, but ignores Saar’s other descriptions of women who used respect and professionalism in their interrogations of Arab prisoners. The above editorialist advocates the view that any presence of women is automatically and irrevocably sexual; therefore, “As an act of self-respect,” women should be removed from contact with male prisoners.

These discourses suggest that when women interrogators use sex as an interrogation method, even if they do so willingly, following a directive to be “creative,” they are

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<sup>75</sup> “Send a Clear Signal: Torture Not Tolerated,” *Miami Herald*, May 16, 2005.

<sup>76</sup> “Self-Inflicted Wounds,” *New York Times*, February 15, 2005, Late Edition Final, 18.

<sup>77</sup> “The Women of Gitmo.”

<sup>78</sup> “Iraqis Demonstrate Torture.”

dehumanized and degraded by their own actions. Likely, there is some truth in this often well-meaning discourse. Saar's book, for example, reports that after engaging in a particularly obscene sexual interrogation, "Brooke", the interrogator, burst into tears.<sup>79</sup> Clearly, perpetrating an abuse against another human being would be psychologically damaging for anyone who possesses any degree of humanity. As such, it is not problematic that news analysts condemned the military for "using" women in a way that would be demeaning to them and emotionally damaging to the prisoners. What is problematic is that there is no similar commentary regarding the male military and civilian personnel who are known to have engaged in violent interrogations some of which resulted in prisoner deaths. The silence surrounding the impact of violent torture on the men who perpetrate it suggests that this is not a social problem. It suggests that men may be naturally violent, and able to readily enact the violence necessary for warriors, yet are able to extinguish violent tendencies when they are no longer in the interrogation room. It suggests that male violence, innate and necessary,<sup>80</sup> does not psychologically touch male torturers. The abundance of discourse alerting the public to the degradation of military women, when compared to the dearth of discourse expressing concern about the impact of violence upon male torturers, further suggests that female sexuality is of more danger to society than is male violence.

To illustrate this point, it is helpful to consider a case study that serves as a comparison to the story of women at Gitmo. This is a case of a prison camp in Afghanistan known as the Bagram Collection Point. In May 2005, the *New York Times* published a lengthy report about prisoner torture at Bagram which in 2002 had resulted in the brutal deaths of two prisoners in custody. The source for the story was a "nearly 2,000-page confidential file of the Army's

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<sup>79</sup> Saar and Novak, 228.

<sup>80</sup>See R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, Second Ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 45.

criminal investigation into the case.”<sup>81</sup> The few articles and editorials that followed drew upon the *Times* report as a source. While the *Times* report contains the themes I have already discussed here, namely, women explicitly labeled as “female” regardless of their actions, and the suggestion that at least one woman’s actions were specifically tied to her identity as female, the report is unique in that it contains disturbing revelations of displays of hyper-masculinity.

The article reports that members of the Third Platoon stationed at Bagram had been nicknamed “the Testosterone Gang.” “Several were devout bodybuilders,” notes the article, and a group of them had “decorated their tent with a Confederate flag.” One interrogator, Specialist Damien M. Corsetti, who was only 23 at the time, bore the nickname “Monster,” which he’d had tattooed in Italian across his stomach. Corsetti was well known for his violent tendencies in the interrogation room. During one interrogation, he pulled out his penis, thrust it into a prisoner’s face, and threatened the man with rape. Corsetti was later transferred to Iraq and wound up at Abu Ghraib. There, he was “fined and demoted for forcing an Iraqi woman to strip during questioning.” Corsetti was sometimes referred to as “the king of torture.” He was one of several soldiers who were implicated in the torture murders of two Afghan prisoners in late 2002.

One prisoner, identified as Habibullah, “a brother of a former Taliban commander,” had a reputation for being particularly intractable in interrogations. Habibullah arrived at Bagram on November 28, 2002, and by December 4<sup>th</sup> he was dead. The prisoner was labeled as uncooperative, and was the recipient of many beatings, including commonly used “peroneal strikes,” where prisoners would be struck above the knee in the peroneal nerve. The blow was designed to cause a great deal of pain, thereby incapacitating the prisoner. As the *Times* reports, “communication between Mr. Habibullah and his jailers appears to have been almost exclusively

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<sup>81</sup> Golden.

physical.” An autopsy attributed Habibullah’s death “to a blood clot, probably caused by the severe injuries to his legs, which traveled to his heart and blocked the blood flow to his lungs.”

Similarly brutal was the death of a 22-year old taxi driver known as “Dilawar” who arrived at Bagram one day after Habibullah’s death.<sup>82</sup> Dilawar was reported by his family to be a shy, uneducated man who had rarely ventured outside of the village where he lived with his wife, young daughter, and extended family. The taxi he had obtained was a way for him to support his family. He was detained at a checkpoint when he drove his passengers past an American base that had been mortared that morning. Dilawar’s three passengers were eventually sent to Gitmo (and released a year later without charges), but Dilawar was sent to Bagram. He was quickly labeled as uncooperative, although some witnesses disputed this label. The military investigation concluded that there were no Arabic translators who could speak fluently Dilawar’s obscure Pashto dialect, so what was perceived as a lack of cooperation was actually a complete failure to communicate.

According to the *Times* reading of the military investigation, Dilwar had received over 100 peroneal strikes. It was reported that some of the MP’s found it amusing that Dilwar would cry out “Allah!” after each strike, so they would hit him just to make him scream. During his interrogation sessions, he was subjected to threats and sexual humiliation, and then further beatings when he could not physically perform tasks he was ordered to perform, such as assuming stress positions, because he had already been so badly beaten. On December 10<sup>th</sup>, Dilawar died. The medical examiner reported that the prisoner had died of heart failure, but that his heart had failed because of the extreme injuries to his legs. According to the coroner’s assessment of Dilawar’s cause of death, his legs had been “pulpified” by the repeated peroneal

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<sup>82</sup> For a documentary film treatment of Dilawar’s story, see *Taxi to the Dark Side*, prod. Alex Gibney, Eva Orner, Susanna Shipman, dir. Alex Gibney, 106 min., Image Entertainment, 2007, DVD.

strikes. The coroner added that she had seen similar injuries in people who had been run over by a bus. The military investigation revealed that before his final interrogations, his interrogators had concluded that he was of no intelligence value. Like Habibullah, Dilawar's death was ruled a homicide.

The media reporting on the Habibullah and Dilawar murders, while outraged, was sparse. Despite the lack of sustained interest in the case, the follow-up stories and editorials demanded accountability for the deaths of the Afghan men and for persistent accounts of abuse at Bagram and Gitmo. It would be a mistake to suggest that there was less media fury shown for the murders at Bagram than there was for the sexual abuse at Gitmo. Even though there was more continuous reporting on the women of Gitmo, the outcry was as indignant in both cases. What is lacking from follow up reporting on the Bagram case is any suggestion that the behavior of the male soldiers and interrogators was in any way expressions of aberrant masculinity. The original *Times* report, by noting the over-the-top display of masculinity of a group of men within the Third Platoon, certainly laid the groundwork for critical reflection, but none followed. There is also a deafening silence in the media discourse with regard to any concern over the psychic damage that might have been inflicted upon those who participated in the murders of Habibullah and Dilawar

The discourse that followed the *Times* report mostly excoriates the Bush administration, especially the Justice Department and the Pentagon, for setting a stage that was amenable for prisoner abuse and torture. By Bush's ignoring international law and attempting to narrowly redefine torture, much media reporting laid the blame for the murders at Bagram squarely at the feet of the president. Newspaper editorials demanded "a truly independent investigation that

includes reviews of not just the Pentagon but the CIA as well.”<sup>83</sup> An editorial in the *Bangor Daily News* agreed, noting that “responsible higher-ups must be identified and punished, including those who manipulated official policy to permit torture.”<sup>84</sup> Another editorial decried the typical result in reported cases of prisoner abuse: “When anyone is held responsible, it is low-ranking service people.”<sup>85</sup> The writer goes on to note that this time such a remedy would be no remedy: “The only way for the United States to salvage its reputation in the world and among its own citizens is through the appointment of an independent federal investigator on detainee abuse.” A writer for the *New Yorker* agreed with all of the above editorials when he wrote that “the indulgence of this sort of depravity goes to, and comes from, the top.”<sup>86</sup>

News media was certainly justified in demanding culpability from the chain of command. As editorialists correctly noted, low level soldiers often bear the brunt of abuse scandals, while those who likely give the order, or who fail to give proper supervision and training, remain untainted. Many of the articles that reported and commented upon the women at Gitmo expressed the same concern. What makes the discourse surrounding Bagram different from that of Gitmo is that there is a plethora of gendered discourse about the latter and almost none about the former. Where much attention is given to the embodied female abusers at Gitmo, the maleness of the abusers at Bagram, when it is mentioned at all, is nearly relegated to a footnote. Golden’s original story opened the way for those that followed to enter into discourse about the abuse of masculinity at the collection point. But none of the follow-up commentary mentions the “Testosterone Gang,” or Corsetti’s offending penis tactic. Unlike the breasts and genitalia of the women at Gitmo, discourse of which was repeatedly reproduced, Corsetti’s brandished and

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<sup>83</sup> “Investigate the Abuse,” *St. Petersburg Times*, May 26, 2005, South Pinellas Edition, 14A.

<sup>84</sup> “Poppies and Torture,” *Bangor Daily News*, May 24, 2005, A8.

<sup>85</sup> “Torture, American Style,” *Record* (Bergen County, NJ), May 22, 2005, O02.

<sup>86</sup> Hendrik Hertzberg, “Big News Week,” *New Yorker*, May 30, 2005, 33.



threatening penis elicited no sustained media outcry. It is as if “Monster’s” threat of rape was not taken seriously by those who commented upon the abuse at Bagram – certainly it was not taken as seriously as the women who rubbed their breasts on prisoners or smeared them with fake menstrual blood.

In addition to the lack of discourse about the embodied masculinity of the perpetrators of murder at Bagram, there is no discourse that discusses the degradation of said perpetrators. Where media representatives suggest that the women at Gitmo were uniquely degraded, exploited, and dehumanized by their own behavior, there is no matching discourse regarding the men at Bagram. This silence is puzzling. It is reasonable that those who engaged in horrific violence at Bagram would experience some psychological trauma once removed from the surreal environment of war. After all, many returning veterans of the Iraq war have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of the horrors they have witnessed and perpetrated.<sup>87</sup> It also seems reasonable that, with PTSD contributing to alcohol and drug abuse as well as suicide, domestic abuse, and other violent crimes, these men could subsequently become a threat to themselves or to others. But no editorial concern is shown for the men who brutally murdered two helpless prisoners, or indeed about any of the men who have been implicated in prisoner torture. In contrast, there is no lack of patronizing concern shown for the women who engaged in sexual interrogations. The inference is that men are not as psychically fragile as women, and/or that perpetrating violence does not negatively impact men to the extent that perpetrating sexual abuse impacts women. These men may bring shame to their country – and there is a surplus of commentary suggesting just that – but their actions bring no harm to themselves.

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<sup>87</sup> Dan Frosch, “Fighting the Terror of Battles That Rage in Soldiers' Heads,” *New York Times*, May 13, 2007, Late Edition Final, 18.

The solution to the problems at Bagram as suggested by media discourses is a full investigation of the chain of command. This solution is also offered for the interrogation lapses at Gitmo, with one crucial difference: Where at least one pundit suggested that the solution to the problem of Gitmo would be to remove women, no discourse suggests that violent young men who demonstrate sociopathic tendencies may not have the wisdom or patience to use anything other than physical aggression in the interrogation room, and should therefore be removed from active duty. As was the case for Abu Ghraib, no media commentary scrutinized individual male behavior for violent histories and tendencies, nor suggested that the Bush administration and the Pentagon are supporting policies that turned young men into soulless murderers. The collective men involved in the Bagram murders were portrayed as one of many faulty cogs in the military machine, but not as men in who were put in psychological danger by their violent actions.

A final way in which the discourses surrounding the women of Gitmo differed from that surrounding the women of Abu Ghraib involved one of the very methods of interrogation reportedly used by the women at Guantánamo Bay. Saar's book and the simultaneously released FBI and Pentagon reports confirmed prisoner reports that women interrogators had smeared what was thought to be menstrual blood on the Arab prisoners. While the mixture of blood and war is expected and inevitable, this blood was not accorded the symbolism of honor as that of warrior blood spilled on the battlefield. Rather, this blood brought with it the connotations of pollution shared by Judeo-Christian and Islamic cultures.

#### Blood in the Interrogation Room

While the tight T-shirts and commentary about erections elicited many condemnatory media remarks, this did not compare to the avalanche of censure that accompanied reports of women smearing menstrual blood, fake and real, on the Muslim detainees. This tactic was a

strategy to break the prisoners' ability to gain strength through prayer by making them feel too unclean to pray. The three major monotheisms in the world can trace their origins to the Middle East and early biblical law commonly referred to as the "Old Testament." Here, blood plays a prominent role in a variety of purification rituals. According to the law of Abraham, given a place of honor especially in the Jewish faith and in Islam, baby boys were to be circumcised when they were eight days old. The shedding of their blood from this unmistakably male appendage marked them as being part of God's covenant. Traditionally, the circumcision ritual is more than just the removal of the male foreskin. The importance of the infant male's blood is emphasized in orthodox Jewish requirements in that if a child is born without a foreskin, is circumcised in the hospital prior to the 8<sup>th</sup> day of life, or if a grown man converts, blood must be ritualistically drawn from the glans.<sup>88</sup> There is no corresponding codified ritual for baby girls in the Bible or in the Quran. As a sign of the different values assigned to baby boys and baby girls, the book of Leviticus instructs different lengths of purification for women after a child is born.

If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Her time of blood purification shall be thirty-three days...If she bears a female child, she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation; her time of blood purification shall be sixty-six days.<sup>89</sup>

These traditions emphasize that from birth male and female bodies and blood were viewed differently with the female child perceived as a polluting factor requiring twice the time of purification for the mother as compared to that accompanying a male child.

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<sup>88</sup> Sami A. Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, *Male & Female Circumcision among Jews, Christians and Muslims: Religious, Medical, Social and Legal Debate* (Warren Center, PA: Shangri-La Publications, 2001).

<sup>89</sup> Leviticus 12:2-5, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)*

In addition to male blood being a sign of a special covenant relationship with God, blood was also a sign of atonement for sins. The “Old Testament” and the Quran both advocate animal sacrifice in order to atone for sins. The book of Leviticus offers a detailed treatment for animals sacrificed in praise to God or for atonement for sins, and all required blood to be sprinkled on the altar of God.<sup>90</sup> The Quran instructs Muslims that certain festivals required ritual sacrifice for atonement.<sup>91</sup> Later, Christian teachings hold that Christ’s blood provided for eternal atonement, replacing inadequate animal blood. As the Bible book of Hebrews points out,

For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins...And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, “he sat down at the right hand of God.”<sup>92</sup>

The use of blood in all three major monotheisms, then, has a long tradition. What is common to these religious practices is that the blood of women is no where mentioned to be used in sacred rituals, nor is it invested with atoning value. Quite to the contrary, female blood, which is represented chiefly by menstrual blood, is portrayed as shameful and unclean.

Traditions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity understand that the Mosaic Law was given to the nation of Israel by God. This law specifically proclaims women to be impure during their menses. As the book of Leviticus notes,

When a woman has a discharge of blood that is her regular discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until

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<sup>90</sup> See, for example, Leviticus chapter 5, *NRSV*.

<sup>91</sup> See, for example, *Sûrat 22*, and *Sûrat 2:196* Abdullah Yusuf Alia translation (*AYA*).

<sup>92</sup> Hebrews 10:4, 11, 12, *NRSV*

the evening. Everything upon which she lies during her impurity shall be unclean; everything also upon which she sits shall be unclean.<sup>93</sup>

Later scripture details the extent to which menstruating women were considered impure. The prophet Ezekiel claimed that God spoke to him saying that when Israel followed other gods, “they defiled [the land] with their ways and their deeds; their conduct in my sight was like the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual period.”<sup>94</sup> So great was God’s disgust that he destroyed the nation and scattered its people. The comparison suggests that menstruating women, too, are objects of defilement and disgust. Likewise, the Quran notes regarding menstruating women, “They are a hurt and a pollution: so keep away from women in their courses, and do not approach them until they are clean.”<sup>95</sup> Menstruating women are considered to be so unclean that they must abstain from “prayer and visits to the mosque during their menses.”<sup>96</sup> Conservative Islam generally observes segregation of men and women unless they are married, but during menstruation not even a woman’s husband may have contact with her. In fact, menstruation is regarded as one of the reasons that women do not merit equal treatment with men. Barbara F. Stowasser provides a paraphrase of one noted conservative Egyptian nationalist, who says “...women resemble children. Like children, they are emotional and, lacking analytic insight, are given to unbalanced mood shifts, from joy to sorrow, from pain to pleasure, from hatred to love. Most importantly, women menstruate while men do not.”<sup>97</sup>

With the major monotheisms drawing from the same cultural source, it should not be surprising that the deep anxiety about female menstrual blood is not isolated to the ideological

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<sup>93</sup> Leviticus 15: 19,20, *NRSV*

<sup>94</sup> Ezekiel 36:17, *NRSV*

<sup>95</sup> *Sūrat* 2:222, *AYA*.

<sup>96</sup> Sangeetha Madhavan and Aisse Diarra, “The Blood That Links: Menstrual Regulation among the Bamana of Mali,” in *Regulating Menstruation: Beliefs, Practices, Interpretations*, ed. Etienne van de Walle and Elisha P. Renne (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 175.

<sup>97</sup> Barbara F. Stowasser, “Women’s Issues in Modern Islamic Thought,” in *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*, ed. Judith E. Tucker (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 15.

“other” found in the person of the Muslim prisoner. Western, Judeo-Christian culture, for all its proclamations of enlightenment, also finds menstrual blood to be a source of fear and disgust. Melissa Raphael, a scholar of theology and religious studies, notes: “There seems little doubt that the biblical traditions have and continue to find menstrual blood repellent to the holy. It is quite outside or profane to the mechanisms of atonement and salvation which are lubricated by male sacrificial blood.”<sup>98</sup> Menstrual blood is not a substance that can be discarded from the female body thereby restoring it to male purity. The blood is a sign of an inherently inferior and flawed body. As Shildrick and Price argue, the female body, in contrast to the properly contained male body, is “marked by the capacity of that which leaks from the body – menstrual blood is the best exemplar – to defile and contaminate.”<sup>99</sup> As Lee and Sasser-Coen note,

In terms of menstrual pollution and contamination...historically and cross-culturally, menstrual blood has been considered both magical and poisonous, and social interpretations of women’s bleeding have structured and restricted women’s lives. These interpretations have often tended to involve a discourse of pollution and the requirement of a separation or seclusion of individual women from the daily activities of others (especially men, and primarily husbands).<sup>100</sup>

Arguably, then, the narrative of menstrual pollution is as deeply embedded in Judeo-Christian culture as it is in Muslim culture. Watching any Western television program where women are presumed to be the primary audience will reveal a surplus of products – the “faceless messages of capitalism”<sup>101</sup> – that are designed to erase any sign of the offending “period.” Women are

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<sup>98</sup> Melissa Raphael, *Theology and Embodiment: The Post-Patriarchal Reconstruction of Female Sacralty* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd., 1996), 171.

<sup>99</sup> Shildrick and Price, 7.

<sup>100</sup> Janet Lee and Jennifer Sasser-Coen, *Blood Stories: Menarche and the Politics of the Female Body in Contemporary U.S. Society* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 70.

<sup>101</sup> Lee and Sasser-Coen, 59.

encouraged to douche, spray, deodorize, and take diuretics – anything to hide menstruation from the outside world. There are even oral contraceptives on the market that will reduce or eliminate the occurrence of “messy” monthly cycles.<sup>102</sup>

As the above examples demonstrate, blood has a long history of symbolism for Judeo-Christian and Islamic cultures, with distinct differences in treatment for the blood of men compared to the blood of women. Where women’s blood seems irrevocably tied to their reproductive functions, men’s blood is representative of greater symbolic value. Culturally, the blood of males, especially when it is shed in protection of the homeland in war, is afforded sacred status. Blood is understood as being inseparable from war – it is expected to be shed, and is the symbolic price paid for victory and defeat. But the blood that makes an appearance in the interrogation rooms of Gitmo is viewed as a different and distinctly inferior kind of blood. When a warrior spills “his” blood on the battlefield it is often a source of pride for his comrades and surviving loved ones, even as they mourn his loss. A war wound, far from something to be hidden, is referred to as a “red badge of courage.”<sup>103</sup> It is a sign that a warrior has made great sacrifices for his country. Even the red color in the American flag symbolizes the blood of warriors who have fallen in defense of the homeland. Presidents since the founding of the United States have spoken reverential words in honor of soldiers, mostly male, whose blood has been shed in pursuit of duty. The Iraq war is unique in that it is the first time when menstrual blood, the source of which is always biological women, was reported to have been visibly shed as part of military strategy. In essence, menstrual blood, used in interrogations in service of the war on terrorism, mingled with warrior blood, also shed in service of the war on terrorism. Needless to say, this feminine blood is not accorded the hallowed position of that of male warriors who die

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<sup>102</sup> Karen Houppert, “Final Period,” *New York Times*, July 17, 2007, Late Edition Final, 21.

<sup>103</sup> From Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage* (New York: Tor, 1990).

violently. Rather than a symbol of sacrifice and courage, female menstrual blood is a sign of weakness and disease. This viewpoint was brought forcefully to public attention in 1995 when then House Speaker Newt Gingrich referred to women's monthly cycles as "infections" which make them ill-equipped to serve in combat.<sup>104</sup>

Perhaps the anxiety and disgust expressed regarding menstrual blood has something to do with its source. Where male blood, a warrior's blood, is reflective of a sacrifice that spills something that would not ordinarily be spilled, female blood comes unbidden from a body that tends to be uncontained. Menstrual blood, perceived as polluted and coming as it does without warning or control, analogizes the apprehension culturally expressed regarding women's bodies in general. As Lee and Sasser-Coen note with regard to the difference in perception of the male and female bodies:

On the one hand, woman is associated with life, while on the other, her bleeding and oozing body – reminiscent of earthly vulnerabilities – is met with disgust. Male bodies are not so symbolically marked with such connotations. Men are more easily able to imagine their bodies free of such constraints, and they project their fears and hatred of frailty and mortality onto women's flesh.<sup>105</sup>

In exploring cultural understandings of menstrual blood, Sophie Laws found that men had decidedly more negative associations with menstrual blood than did women. One of her interviewees commented that menstrual blood seemed "dirty...like afterbirth or something like that...not something I'd like to be touching...whereas ordinary blood, I wouldn't mind that at all." This participant added that menstrual blood, unlike an ordinary cut, was impure and carried

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<sup>104</sup> Clarence Page, "Newt's Notion of Truth Requires No Basis in Fact," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, January 24, 1995, Final Edition, A9.

<sup>105</sup> Lee and Sasser-Coen, 16.



the “connotations of discharge.”<sup>106</sup> This man’s perception may encapsulate the negative cultural narrative with regard to menstrual blood when compared to “ordinary blood”: It is understood as something dirty and polluted that is discharged or purged only from the female body. The male body and blood is not similarly sullied.

The disquiet about menstrual blood that Judeo-Christian culture shares with its ideological enemy, Islam, is reflected in the reporting of the women at Gitmo who wiped menstrual blood on their prisoners. Commentators were often explicit in their view of this act as a sexual act, even though the descriptions of the menstrual blood tactic were quite different from the overtly sexual interrogations. These acts were reported to be separate from those that were described in more erotic terms. Men were not smeared with menstrual blood in an attempt to titillate them. So the fact that commentators saw this behavior as explicitly sexual closely links women’s menstrual blood to their sexuality, and represents a profound “leak” of something that is viewed as dangerous and in need of containment. One editorial describes these actions as “almost depraved sexual conduct,”<sup>107</sup> while another uses the word “grotesque.”<sup>108</sup> An editorial listed the menstrual blood tactic among things that “violate American moral values,”<sup>109</sup> while another asked, “From under exactly what rock did the perpetrators of these filthy methods crawl?”<sup>110</sup> An opinion piece in a South Carolina newspaper refers to the tactic as “something out of a pornographic movie,”<sup>111</sup> to which another editorial adds that it is “bizarrely

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<sup>106</sup> Sophie Laws, *Issues of Blood: The Politics of Menstruation* (Basingstoke, England: Macmillan, 1990), 33-34.

<sup>107</sup> “A Type of Pain,” *Intelligencer Journal* (Lancaster, PA), February 15, 2005, A-8.

<sup>108</sup> Gene Lyons, “A Convenient Furor,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, May 18, 2005.

<sup>109</sup> “The Women of Gitmo.”

<sup>110</sup> “Iraqis Demonstrate Torture.”

<sup>111</sup> “Torture in Guantánamo,” *Herald* (Rock Hill, SC), February 7, 2005, Final Edition, 7A.

sadomasochistic.”<sup>112</sup> An article in a Pittsburgh newspaper succinctly refers to the smearing of fake menstrual blood on captives as “pretty damn primitive.”<sup>113</sup>

Certainly, smearing a subdued prisoner with a substance that he believes to be a violation of his closely held religious beliefs is an abhorrent abuse of power. But the outrage expressed regarding this blood seems excessive given its relatively minor role in interrogations. With many blood-letting abuses being performed in interrogation rooms, it is telling that so much rage is stirred up regarding this blood. Of course, the blood that causes so much anxiety and revulsion is distinctly female, and as such comes from a source that has long been viewed as polluted. This blood, more than other kinds of blood spilled in the war on terrorism, has drawn much outraged and indignant attention from media sources.

By displaying this offensive blood, the women violated both the cultural precepts of their prisoners and their own cultural norms. By displaying their blood, women interrogators are metaphorically implying refusal of the Judeo-Christian and Muslim topoi of home and family. They are in a place belonging to men – an extension of the battlefield – and in a role reserved for men – that of dominating warrior. These women are not at home, serving to reproduce individual men. Instead, they are assuming the place of the warrior, protecting the tribe, society, or culture. Their display of menstrual blood emphasizes that they have not been impregnated by any man. It may serve to flaunt their role transgression, and in so doing it may highlight the unique powers of women, which have been valued by men only when they have been under the control and utilization of individual men. Even in relatively progressive Western cultures, women have granted only limited control over their biologically leaky bodies. The historical clash with Islam brings to the surface the lines of control, because the ideological control mechanisms in Muslim

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<sup>112</sup> Rui Wang, “United States Swimming in a Culture of Torture,” *Arizona Daily Wildcat*, February 16, 2005.

<sup>113</sup> “Flushing Away the Truth,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 27, 2005, Sooner Edition, A-2.

countries under Sharī‘ah remain in some sense at the origin point from which Western society sees itself as emerging. That military culture views this blood as an exceptionally productive tool against Muslim prisoners demonstrates an understanding of its symbolic power. But the Western commentators’ expression of repugnance regarding this blood is demonstrative of Judeo-Christian culture’s alignment with the thoroughly “othered” Islamic culture, so often described as unenlightened.

The display of this blood marks these interrogators definitively as women and as an anathema to the warrior. It proves that they are in a place they do not belong, doing a job for which they are not fit. Their blood cannot traditionally be pure male blood, such as that marked by blood-letting circumcisions, or that willingly spilled by the ultimate masculine atoning figure of Christ. When this kind of blood is spilled in sacrifice, Western commentators are so appalled at what the blood represents that they are unable to see it and accept it as a sacrifice. This kind of blood has no tradition of use in sacrifice either to atone or to save. It can only be used to shame both the woman who has allowed it to be seen, and the debased prisoner upon whom it is smeared as a sign of his feminizing humiliation. While almost anything goes in the interrogation room, clearly not menstrual blood. Drawing such a line reveals the deep level at which our ideological structures have not yet accommodated themselves to including all of what it is to be women as human and acceptable for “public” participation. Menstrual blood is no more biologically toxic than any other blood, and yet it is as threatening to the U.S. commentators as it is to the Muslim prisoners. Until menstrual blood can be treated as just blood, women’s place in the public mind and the warrior’s role will remain ideologically uncomfortable, contestable, insecure, and peculiarly threatening.

## Conclusion

When Arab prisoners began arriving at Gitmo, an effort was made on the part of the Bush administration to assure the American people that these men were known to be dangerous terrorists. President Bush asserted that the prisoners would “not be treated as prisoners of war. They’re illegal combatants. These are killers. These are terrorists.”<sup>114</sup> Vice President Dick Cheney affirmed Bush’s claim when he stated that the prisoners were “the worse of a very bad lot. They are very dangerous. They are devoted to killing millions of Americans...and they are perfectly prepared to die in the effort.”<sup>115</sup> And Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, who had decided that Gitmo was “least worst place”<sup>116</sup> for the detainees declared them to be “among the best-trained, most-vicious...killers on the face of the earth.”<sup>117</sup>

Despite the presumptive guilt of the prisoners, most of whom had yet to be charged with any crime, “the Pentagon has been steadily reducing the number of prisoners there.”<sup>118</sup> Their numbers declined from a high of 680 in 2003 to just over 300 in 2007.<sup>119</sup> Human rights organizations, such as the International Red Cross and Amnesty International, were vocal in their insistence that the prisoners needed to be charged or released, and the United Nation’s brought its own pressure to bear when it determined that the prison should be closed. U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated that opposition to people being held in perpetuity, without prosecution, was “something that is common to every legal system.”<sup>120</sup> Anan urged President Bush to close the prison. The future of Gitmo also became a point of debate early in the 2008

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<sup>114</sup> Hutcheson.

<sup>115</sup> Robert Burns, “Administration Still Divided on Question of Applying Geneva Convention to Prisoners in Cuba,” *AP Newswire*, January 28, 2002, BC Cycle.

<sup>116</sup> Edmonson.

<sup>117</sup> Tom Infield, “Rumsfeld: Detainees Aren't POW's,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 28, 2002, Sooner Edition, A-4.

<sup>118</sup> Carol Rosenberg, “U.S. Sends 16 Saudis Home from Guantánamo,” *McClatchy-Tribune News Service*, September 6, 2007.

<sup>119</sup> Rosenberg, “U.S. Sends 16 Saudis Home.”

<sup>120</sup> Edith M. Lederer, “Annan Says U.S. Should Close Gitmo Prison,” *Associated Press*, February 17, 2006.

presidential campaign with former Democratic hopeful John Edwards promising to close the prison on his first day in office,<sup>121</sup> if elected, and former Republican hopeful Mitt Romney saying Gitmo not only needed to be kept open, it needed to be doubled.<sup>122</sup> The ultimate winner of the election, Barack Obama, had campaigned on the promise of closing Gitmo.<sup>123</sup> But once taking office, his plans to close the detention facility were met with mounting resistance from lawmakers, requiring him to postpone his plan indefinitely.<sup>124</sup> As of this writing, the latest plan being floated with regard to the Guantánamo detainees is that they be housed in a super-max facility in Northern Illinois.<sup>125</sup> As this plan enters public debate, they remain in limbo at Gitmo.

If Gitmo's future is uncertain, the same cannot be said for the interrogators who received so much attention for their actions. None of the women have been court-martialed or subject to civilian prosecution, nor are they likely to be. A military review determined that none of the interrogation tactics in use at Gitmo constituted torture.<sup>126</sup> At least one woman interrogator was "verbally reprimanded" for using fake menstrual blood on a prisoner, but only because she used it to retaliate against a prisoner who had spit on her, not because the tactic was disapproved.<sup>127</sup> All of this indicates that what the civilian press and public respond to with such acrimony is contrarily perceived as a useful tool by those seeking intelligence from Muslim prisoners.

Perhaps it is not surprising that there has been a similar lack of successful prosecutions for the perpetrators of murder at Bagram. The last trial held, which was against Damien Corsetti

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<sup>121</sup> Tyler Whitley, "Mitt Romney in Richmond," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, August 1, 2007.

<sup>122</sup> Janet Hook, "Campaign '08: The Bush Factor," *Los Angeles Times*, September 3, 2007, Home Edition, 1.

<sup>123</sup> Jonathan S. Landay, "McCain, Obama Differ on How to Fight Terrorism," *McClatchy Newspapers*, October 27, 2008.

<sup>124</sup> "Obama: No Exact Deadline for Closing Gitmo," *Associated Press*, November 18, 2009.

<sup>125</sup> Lynn Sweet, "Illinois' Gitmo Could Bring 3,000 Jobs: White House," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Final Edition, A16.

<sup>126</sup> Errol Louis, "Now, U.S. Becomes the Enemy," *Daily News* (New York), January 3, 2006, Final Edition, 31.

<sup>127</sup> Dart.

(aka “Monster”) in 2006, resulted in his acquittal.<sup>128</sup> Only one soldier was convicted at trial and he received no prison time and was given an honorable discharge.<sup>129</sup> According to Tim Golden’s sources, one of the possible reasons convictions of the soldiers was blocked was because “Army judges and jurors...seemed to consider the soldiers’ guilt or innocence with an acute sense of the sacrifices they had made in serving overseas.”<sup>130</sup> It now appears that no one will be held responsible for the torture-murders of Habibullah and Dilawar.

Abu Ghraib, Gitmo, and Bagram demonstrate that men and women are equally capable of torturing fellow humans if the circumstances are deemed favorable. These cases also demonstrate that the United States armed forces, including its military, civilian, and covert agencies, have established a pattern of allowing torture of prisoners captured in the “war on terrorism.” Official denials and word-parsing notwithstanding, the evidence is simply too vast to suggest otherwise. Media discourses provide a valuable public service in bringing such atrocities to the attention of the citizenry. Unfortunately, the media discourses are doing more than playing the role of watchdog of government sanctioned abuse. As I have argued in this chapter and the previous chapter, these discourses do the work of socially disciplining women for their lapses of proper femininity, while maintaining the invisibility of male torturers. This disparity demonstrates that the vocal cultural prohibition against torture does not equally apply to men and women, which tends to negate its value as a prohibition.

The current conflict has been portrayed as good versus evil, specifically Judeo-Christian versus Islam, freedom and liberty versus fanaticism and oppression. At the intersections, one finds that gender expectations do not so much clash as they concur. Women’s rights have made

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<sup>128</sup> Tim Golden, “In Final Trail, G.I. Is Acquitted of Abusing Afghan Detainees,” *New York Times*, June 2, 2006, Late Edition Final, 8.

<sup>129</sup> Tim Golden, “Years after 2 Afghans Died, Abuse Case Falters,” *New York Times*, February 13, 2006, Late Edition Final, 1.

<sup>130</sup> Golden, “Abuse Case Falters.”

far greater strides in Western cultures than in cultures practicing *Sharī‘ah*, but at a fundamental level, women across these cultures are understood – consciously or unconsciously – to be inferior to men. No matter how competent the woman, or how high the achievement, she cannot escape her physical body. Men, on the other hand, simply by virtue of being born male, may qualify as hero and savior. Their actions may subsequently disqualify them, but the shape and content of their bodies do not.

Up to this point, the male savior has remained a shadowy figure in news media. Male interrogators and soldiers do torture, and there is plenty of evidence for this point. But very few attain visibility. Most operate anonymously, unindicted by military or civilian justice or by mass media reporting. As Dick Cheney suggested, these ones work on “the dark side” and “in the shadows.”<sup>131</sup> Where news media has been reluctant to give a visible face and body to these government sanctioned heroes, popular entertainment media has filled in the gap. As the next chapter will demonstrate, the shape of the male hero needed to fight “evil” has been honed since September 11<sup>th</sup> by a genre of television entertainment programming that depicts government agents fighting terrorism. This hero differs dramatically from that in past decades. This hero is strong, brave, self-sacrificing, tortured, and willing to torture. Most importantly, this hero is messianic in providing salvation, and above all, he is male.

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<sup>131</sup> Ken Herman, “Bush Urges Americans to Return to Work as Nation Awaits Market Reaction,” *Cox News Service*, September 16, 2001.