

The Gendering of Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan

In February 2009, a team of women Marines first set out to meet with Afghan women in Farah province to find out what their concerns and needs might be. A number of so-called female engagement teams (FETs), haphazardly drawn together from those few women Marines already in Afghanistan (and generally assigned to other jobs which they continued to carry out), started operating in Afghanistan in subsequent months. The teams were poorly trained but highly motivated and were attached to male units mainly in the southern and eastern provinces that are known to be particularly dangerous. They began conversations with Afghan women wherever possible but were rarely part of any coordinated effort. They were often confronted with problems they had no capability to address and repeatedly failed to deliver on promises made to residents, as their mission was not the primary concern of military commanders. It was not until March 2010 that forty Marine Corps women formally began to train for duty on FETs and subsequently deployed to Helmand province in April 2010.¹

The effort to deploy FETs is a recent consequence of the adoption of counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine in Afghanistan.² David Petraeus, commander of the 101st Airborne Division in Iraq in 2003–4, resurrected COIN, a traditional mainstay of colonial war fighting, as an appropriate strategy. His success with the population-centric strategy in Mosul no doubt influenced his subsequent career, including a brief stop to supervise operations of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan 2010–11, as well as the later adoption of COIN, and not just in Iraq.³ The 2006 U.S. Army and Marine Corps *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (FM 3–24) outlines the key concepts of COIN doctrine. FM 3–24 repeatedly points out the limits of standard military strategy and seeks to mitigate the often unintended consequences of military force by proposing a broader strategy of development and reconstruction. Unlike pure counterterrorist warfare, the aim of which is to kill as many insurgents as possible, counterinsurgency aims to build confidence and win the hearts and minds of the population, whose support is crucial to the continuation of the insurgency the United States is trying to stop.

As Laleh Khalili points out, “This coding of counterinsurgency as the civilianised option which aims at winning the hearts and minds of civilian populations and persuading them to support the counterinsurgents has a particular gendered character.”⁴ Where traditional warfare—and especially tactics often associated with counterterrorism efforts—is coded as hypermasculine, counterinsurgency is presented as the gentler, feminine option. “Since the focus of the counterinsurgency is the transformation of *civilian* allegiances and remaking of their social world,” a further feminization is underway: “In the binary categorization of war which forms the basis

of mainstream discourses about war, civilian (feminine) is the opposite of combatant (masculine).”⁵

In this essay, we argue that looking at the gendering of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan provides insight into the assumptions, strategies, and anxieties about the U.S. involvement in this particular war. We see in the gendering of counterinsurgency, exemplified most strikingly in the deployment of FETs, an attempt to reframe the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan as a humanitarian, even progressive, mission. Gendering counterinsurgency efforts as a gentler (feminine) option helps to sell the current campaign to a war-weary audience in the United States (and allied countries). It is also a way of marking U.S. civilizational superiority—and the attention lavished upon FETs deployed in Afghanistan is a significant aspect of this gendered narrative.⁶ Besides exploring how the operational objectives of the deployment of FETs are gendered, we pay particular attention to the signaling function of their deployment directed toward audiences in Afghanistan as well as citizens of the United States and its allies. Finally, we examine what the experience of women in female engagement teams reveals about how much U.S. military cultures are—or are not—changing. Budget pressures, war fatigue, and rapidly shifting geopolitical realities have required that the Pentagon cultivate a dynamic image of military deployments at home and abroad. Technological innovations such as drones provide one clear way to signal that war and the military are being reinvented; gendering counterinsurgency is another way to demonstrate that the United States is no longer fighting its new battles with outmoded methods.

One difficulty in analyzing how gender inflects counterinsurgency is the fact that counterinsurgency is both a doctrine and a strategy; this means that it is an aspirational vision as well as a guide for planning operations. David Kilcullen, a counterinsurgency expert who has served as an adviser to General Petraeus and General Stanley McChrystal and is a fellow at the Center for New American Security, notes that “doctrine is not only an idealized description of how things are done but also an attempt to inculcate habits of mind and action that change organizational culture and behavior.”⁷ The hope of those who devised FM 3–24 is that by recognizing the limitations of military force, COIN commanders will be able to develop a different kind of operation that will not be plagued by resistance from local populations. COIN, then, is an aspirational doctrine that seeks to overcome the known drawbacks of warfare: “Field manuals say less about how a given military force actually behaves than about how it wants to behave, and the direction in which its leaders (or a fraction of its officer corps) are pushing it.”⁸

COIN doctrine began to inform the U.S. engagement in Afghanistan in 2005, after it was hailed as having garnered success in Iraq under Petraeus’s command. The funding of Human Terrain Systems (HTS), deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan in 2007 to provide cultural knowledge for military operations, is one early indication of COIN’s ascendancy.⁹ Notably, reminiscent of women’s roles in historical imperialist endeavors, it was two white, Western-educated women who outlined the HTS and its logic, proposing that troops were ill-trained to provide the culturally sensitive missions required by counterinsurgency doctrine. COIN was adopted as the formal U.S. strategy in Afghanistan in December 2009 as part of President Barack Obama’s

decision to commit more troops to the region: the Defense Appropriations Bill called it “President Obama’s new counterinsurgency strategy.”¹⁰ As part of the formal adoption of this strategy (which had effectively already been in place), the troop commitment to Afghanistan was increased by 30,000, and more funds were provided for less conventional operations, including the HTS and FETs.¹¹

With its focus on confidence-building and humanitarian missions, COIN is a doctrine that resonates with the “liberal interventionism” of the Obama presidency. Samantha Power, a central advisor for Obama’s foreign policy and strong supporter of the “responsibility to protect” norm, argues that military intervention is necessary to promote human rights. Obama entered office proclaiming an end to American unilateralism, but he has shown a determination to maintain a robust U.S. military presence around the world as well, most notably defending the use of military force even in his acceptance speech of the Nobel Peace Prize.¹² COIN helps to present U.S. military intervention in a new light to audiences at home and abroad.

Others have noted that the strategic operations in Afghanistan do not always match the doctrine of counterinsurgency. Violence is used, often against civilians; troops have less contact with the population than they should; and experts in human terrain often become militarized themselves rather than having the reverse impact upon the units among which they are deployed.¹³ But pointing out that COIN is still warfare or engaging in debates about whether or not it is the right strategy in this particular operating theater does not help to uncover the gendered nuances of the campaign in Afghanistan. In this essay, we look instead at how the rationale for the war in Afghanistan was gendered from the outset and can be read as an effort to present the U.S. military intervention as part of a larger civilizing mission. We examine how counterinsurgency doctrine also employs gendered and neocolonial tropes—and how these became part of the presentation of the benevolent nature of U.S. military force and intervention at a key moment when public and allied support for the efforts in Afghanistan were lagging. Finally, we look at counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan as it has been operationalized through female engagement teams to detail how gendered assumptions are shaping the practices of counterinsurgency not only rhetorically but operationally.

The Mission: Saving (Brown) Women

When Operation Enduring Freedom, the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan, was launched on October 7, 2001, its most obvious justification was the need to avenge the dead of 9/11 and to “smok[e] al Qaeda out of their caves.”¹⁴ Yet, introduced only weeks later, a secondary narrative framed the war in Afghanistan as a rescue operation. In a November 2001 radio address, Laura Bush famously declared that “the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.”¹⁵ In a sleight of hand that would become even more pronounced in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration framed the invasion of Afghanistan as both necessary to fight the war on terror and as a civilizational duty to protect vulnerable women.

Some U.S.-based feminist groups, most notably the Feminist Majority, had long been trying to generate international awareness of the plight of women under the rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan and were excited that their activism was finally garnering

attention.¹⁶ How could they not support an intervention on women's behalf? Barbara Ehrenreich muses that "women's rights may play no part in U.S. foreign policy, but we should perhaps be grateful that they have at least been important enough to deploy in media mobilization for war."¹⁷ Consequently, the war has become framed as a feminist war, even while other feminists have pointed to the dangers of an "embedded feminism" and rejected this idea.¹⁸ As Gargi Bhattacharyya points out: "The problem for women in the 'West' is that the name of our feminism is being taken in vain by those who historically have had little interest in our advancement [and that the] claims that are being made in our name are not, in fact, easily distinguishable from those articulated by 'real' feminists."¹⁹

Gender mainstreaming efforts and feminist lobbying have led to a range of measures to achieve gender equality (whether in coalition governments, the United Nations, or humanitarian NGOs)—the crux of the issue, of course, is the context in which the objectives are pursued and by whom. "They are not the wrong things to ask for necessarily, it is only that to ask for such things in the shadow of military occupation compromises the pursuit of women's rights."²⁰ This is especially pertinent when, in the war on terror, women are used as symbolic markers in the struggle between cultures: Muslim women are presented as politically immature and under barbaric oppression, such that they require rescue through Western (imperial) intervention.²¹ At the same time, women in/of the West have to embody ideas of "our way of life" with its tolerance for ethnic and sexual diversity and its liberated women.²²

The convergence between aspirations that are imperialist and "feminist" is not a new one. The historian Antoinette Burton points out that in the late nineteenth century suffragists in Britain frequently made their case for political inclusion based upon the dominant political narrative of the day: the empire. "As members of an imperial nation, British suffrage writers justified votes for women partly on the grounds that Indian women needed their political influence and their feminist example—two kinds of patronage which they claimed only British *women* could provide."²³ Because the British pointed to the abuse of Indian women through practices such as suttee as one of the desperate conditions that required their civilizing presence, these claims perfectly coincided with the logic of British imperialism. Furthermore, as Burton points out, these claims demonstrated inherent support for the empire itself. "Not only did they link empire repeatedly to arguments for female emancipation, but through their determined use of Indian women as their right and proper colonial constituency, they demonstrated their support for the presentation of British imperial rule in India."²⁴ Just as women were needed to set a proper example in India to liberate Indian women, so they form an integral element of the counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan to win the allegiance of the population.²⁵

Given women's association with tradition and their roles as bearers of culture, using them to justify and then measure the success of foreign intervention is a longstanding practice.²⁶ As Frantz Fanon pointed out, the French colonial administration in Algeria considered every woman who unveiled herself another success in the *mission civilisatrice*.²⁷ Similarly, proponents of FETs suggest that their success in winning the hearts and minds of the Afghan population can be measured through the "acceptance of the rights of women" by locals. More broadly, as the United States has moved to

negotiate with the Taliban, Hillary Clinton has repeatedly declared that the United States will not agree to roll back Afghan women's rights.²⁸ Since negotiating with the Taliban would have been inconceivable a few years ago, it is notable that women's rights have emerged as the proverbial marker in the sand for the United States to measure its mission as a success.

The Doctrine: Feminized Counterinsurgency

Counterinsurgency operations have long been an essential aspect of colonization.²⁹ Developing relative stability in a country whose population resisted foreign rule or intervention required developing a multipronged strategy. Imperialists would never have the advantage of numbers—instead, a combination of selective military force, greatly expanded police forces, cooperation with local authorities, and a deluge of self-congratulatory propaganda was the best means for establishing control over a territory. It is an ironic twist that the new packaging of U.S. power in the twenty-first century should hark back to the colonial practices of the nineteenth century. COIN doctrine in Afghanistan applies this same configuration as local leaders are tapped to help administer ISAF programs, local police are trained to take over the work of the foreign forces, and FETs are deployed in an effort to bring civilizing advances through the liberation of women.

The U.S. military and policy community generally presents COIN as simply a more effective military strategy. However, examination of the doctrine reveals that it is far more ambitious than proposing a blueprint for success in particular engagements. COIN can be seen as an attempt to reframe the scope and purpose of military deployment altogether and in so doing to reassure the public at home and abroad that even as military interventions continue, they are not driven only by U.S. national interests but have international peace and stability as their primary objective. Audiences around the world have become suspicious of arguments such as W. W. Rostow's that the United States was bringing modern development through aerial bombing in Vietnam.³⁰ Population-centered COIN helps reinforce the idea that the end goal of the U.S.-led intervention is humanitarian—that the effort in Afghanistan is geared mainly at saving the civilian population. At the same time, as several feminist scholars have pointed out, references to civilians are gendered feminine, often evidenced in references to saving the women and children.³¹

FM 3–24 asserts that COIN is another kind of war altogether, one that requires officers and soldiers to overcome their own training and assumptions in order to win. This includes rethinking the traditional lines drawn to distinguish between military and civilian, front lines and the home front, governing and military strategies, as these will hinder the campaign. Of course, these divisions have long been gendered: as just warriors protect the beautiful souls at home, the warrior class has been gendered as male by its separation from home life.³² Those who promote COIN bill themselves as a new breed of military strategist able to think beyond the usual paradigms and envision a new kind of warfare that can effectively mobilize *all* the available resources to win. Civilians need to be drafted, humanitarian aid marshaled, and development deployed in order to achieve goals. As in the protests over HTS, this doctrine could lead to objections based on arguments about the militarization of different aspects of

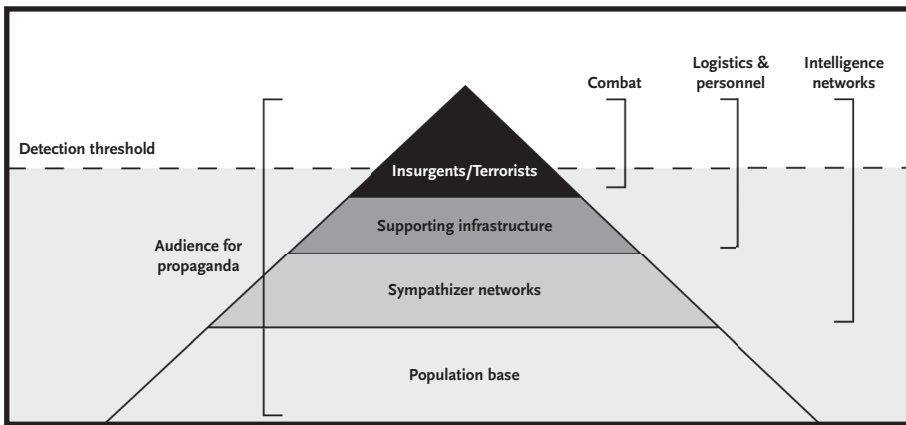
society. Yet because the implementation of COIN remains with the military, it can present itself as having the reverse effect: incorporating other aspects into the military strategy fundamentally changes and softens (read: feminizes) the military. This is one of its most brilliant rhetorical moves.

There is no doubt that COIN is the product of some of the military's best-educated minds. Its best-known proponents today, David Petraeus, David Kilcullen, and John Nagl, all have earned doctorates.³³ As Khalili argues, with COIN "most strikingly, a new form of masculinity emerges, authorized by consumerism and neo-liberal feminism, in which 'manliness' is softened, and the sensitive masculinity of the humanitarian soldier-scholar (white, literate, articulate, and doctorate-festooned) overshadows the hyper-masculinity of warrior kings."³⁴ These soldier-scholars recognize the importance of smart and selective military engagements, the essential role of women both in and outside the military, and the need to move beyond the divisions of home and battlefield, battle strategy and reconstruction, and politics and war to fight most effectively.³⁵

In the narrative promoting COIN, this new brand of soldier-scholar is directly contrasted with images of the misogynist warriors of the Taliban and Al Qaeda and more broadly with the barbaric, gender-segregated society of Afghanistan. This vision of Afghanistan is also reflected in the representations of Afghan women that initially accompanied justifications for intervening in Afghanistan and, more recently, have been used to support a continued foreign presence in the region.³⁶ These images of what Chandra Mohanty has called "'the average third world woman' who 'leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)'" Laura Shepherd argues, "can be read against the dominant representations of the U.S. self-as-nation as a marker of U.S. superiority, social advancement and civilization."³⁷ On this account, winning the war is going to require strategic innovation on the part of COIN to overcome these backward traditions and marshal Afghanistan into the twenty-first century.

One way to establish the unique attributes of COIN as a different kind of military deployment is by comparison to counterterrorism. Counterterrorism targets terrorists and their organizations, trying to capture or kill them in order to bring about the immediate cessation of their activities. Counterterrorism strategizes about what Kilcullen calls "the surface elements" of an insurgency, known and active terrorist groups with the goal to "kill the insurgents and destroy their cadres."³⁸ Yet the surface elements of an insurgency are only the tip of a larger pyramid of support, whose base is composed of the population among which, and on whose behalf (at least allegedly), the insurgency is fought. Due to the important role of the population in the insurgency pyramid, COIN is composed of majority nonmilitary, confidence-building efforts aimed at improving conditions for the supposedly victimized (and thus feminized) population that reluctantly supports the insurgency because there is no alternative.

COIN doctrine envisions the loyalty of the population as the ultimate prize; the population must perceive the counterinsurgent force as more trustworthy than the insurgents.³⁹ In order to win this loyalty, COIN must restrict the use of violence and



Surface and Subsurface: Elements of a Counterinsurgency, from David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (New York, 2010), 8, by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.

focus instead on protecting and addressing the needs of the population. FM 3–24 “cites the view of ‘General Chang Ting-chen of Mao Zedong’s central committee . . . that revolutionary war was 80 percent political action and only 20 percent military,’” as Nir Rosen comments, going on to point out that FM 3–24 also notes that “such an assertion is arguable and certainly depends on the insurgency’s stage of development; it does, however, capture the fact *that political factors have primacy in COIN.*”⁴⁰

The adoption of COIN as the primary strategy in Afghanistan under General McChrystal in July 2009 meant that more attention was being paid to efforts emphasizing those political factors. In addition to trying to provide protection for the population in an effort to win its loyalty, COIN tactics focus on so-called stability operations like rebuilding infrastructure and basic services as well as working to enhance local governance and the rule of law. However, because women’s needs are rarely at the forefront of military strategists’ concerns, “American commanders, saddled with nation-building, doled out millions of dollars in discretionary funds intended for short-term humanitarian projects to build roads (which unescorted women can’t use) and mosques (for men only) before anyone suggested that women perhaps should be consulted.”⁴¹ Commanders of special operations teams that had been engaged in stability operations in remote villages reported their inability to reach women and children who make up as much as 71 percent of the population, reports Lolita Baldor, who also recalls the following statement by Command Sergeant Major Ledford Stigall: “We waited too long to get to this . . . We had a lot of people focused on the kill and capture, and it really took someone to say, hey it’s not about kill and capture, it’s about developing a country that can take care of itself. Women have a voice . . . they can influence the men in their society.”⁴²

Recognizing this dilemma, strategic analysts concluded that the “home front” which provides support and recruits for the insurgency was largely inaccessible to counterinsurgency forces because of prohibitions on female/male contact in Afghan society. Matt Pottinger, Hali Jilani, and Claire Russo, the cofounders and trainers of

the first FET in Afghanistan, coauthored the report “Half-Hearted: Trying to Win Afghanistan with Afghan Women,” which hinted at the intelligence possibilities in female outreach campaigns. They quote an Afghan National Army colonel: “The women pass all the news in the villages. They know who is doing what, who should and should not be in the area. They talk around the well or while they are collecting firewood about the news they have heard from their husbands [and their kids].”⁴³ Furthermore, they assumed women would have a vested interest in siding with the counterinsurgency over the insurgency. “The Taliban is, after all, a movement with few female members or admirers. Its disastrous economic policies of the 1990s, and its extreme notions about gender, including its disrespect for Afghan women’s education and mobility, presents a golden opportunity to win women’s support.”⁴⁴ Outreach to women could be the key for separating the insurgency from the local population.

This assumption that the focus of COIN should be on women—because they are the keepers of the home and have the power to persuade men in their societies—has a long history. Fanon encapsulated the logic of the French occupation of Algeria as follows: “If we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women; we must find them behind the veil where they hide themselves and in the houses where the men keep them out of sight.”⁴⁵ There are two messages contained in all of these stories. The first is that the U.S. military recognizes the importance of women in Afghan society even if Afghan males do not. Second, the U.S. military can learn from its past mistakes and adapt, being an inherently progressive institution. Reaching women to communicate this message—and finding out what women want or know—would require employing women to do COIN.

The Strategy: Female Engagement Teams

After initially relying on ad hoc FETs to engage Afghan women, in March 2010 forty Marines trained and subsequently deployed to Helmand province the following month. According to the Regional Command South West, FETs currently serve as enablers within ten districts and eighty-five villages throughout Helmand province, operating from thirty different posts, bases, and camps.⁴⁶ Nina D’Amato, a major in the Marine Corps, was the gender advisor for the Regional Command South West in Afghanistan and helped oversee different projects that FETs worked on as part of COIN. In an interview, she outlined the logic behind the FETs, what projects the teams have done in Helmand Province for the past two years, and what she saw as indicators of their success. D’Amato framed the entire COIN campaign as changing “the story in a given space.” If the Taliban are recruiting the population based upon immediate gain and security, D’Amato argued that the counterinsurgency campaign is asking them “to bet on the future.” The population may see immediate benefits in working with the Taliban, but COIN wants the population to see that long-term stability and development will only come if they decide to remove support from the insurgents. In line with the gendered narratives described above, D’Amato also argued that Afghan women do not leave villages and are the long-term social memory of the place. “If you want your narrative entrenched, you focus on the women.”⁴⁷ To be able to win hearts and minds by changing the story on the ground, recognizing that war

changes people's stories about themselves and that security always has a narrative component, FETs use a variety of tactics.⁴⁸

While improvements in living standards and rights for Afghans may take years to materialize, COIN needs to achieve buy-in for the long-term strategy that ISAF is offering so that the population withdraws support from the insurgency. At the same time, COIN operatives are also charged with winning a few friends now (and gathering intelligence) by providing some immediate gains. FETs work toward this goal by providing mobile medical services for women and children in rural villages. The Afghan Ministry of Health reported that in 2005 it employed 60 doctors and 120 nurses to work with the 1.5 million residents in Helmand Province. In this region, where 94 percent of the population lives in rural areas, receiving basic healthcare is a rare opportunity. To provide medical outreach, the FETs visit villages and ask local males whether they can provide health services to their families; when given approval, the female soldiers serve as intermediaries between a doctor (often male) and women.⁴⁹ Ibuprofen, ointments for rashes, and antibacterial creams are distributed, often bringing an immediate improvement in the patients' quality of life. The mobile medical units, D'Amato points out, are something which clearly distinguishes the counterinsurgency from the Taliban, who are not able to provide medical care.

FETs also implement the Radio Literacy Project, developed to increase the province's miserable literacy rate (estimated at about 8 percent). COIN units give away radios and specially developed workbooks to families. The Regional Command has established a radio station that, among other programming, provides lessons three times a day at regularly established times. During home visits, FETs show women how to tune in to these shows and explain how they could use their workbooks to learn to read.⁵⁰ D'Amato admitted that they have no idea whether the program has been successful in raising literacy rates, since they have such limited access to the population.⁵¹ However, it is clear that the program is conceived as a transformative experience for women. The developer described the program for *The Stars and Stripes*:

“Towards the end of the [book], it looks like the old fable of the ugly duckling story,” said Spc. Jim Daniels, who developed the program using an official Afghan education ministry reading book for children he found on the Kandahar Air Field boardwalk. “You can see the poor downtrodden duck and [its] evolution into the beautiful swan.”⁵²

The third initiative pursued by FETs is the Women's Governance Outreach Program, bringing female members of the Helmand Provincial Council to rural areas. The idea is that the two groups can provide mutual education. Women who live in the city and have little information about their rural counterparts will become educated about the needs of women very different from themselves. The rural women will see indigenous female role models and aspire to take leadership roles themselves. FETs help to make the arrangements for travel, outreach, translators, and security. Such efforts are crucial, Master Sergeant Julia Watson told Elisabeth Bumiller. FETs have “to move beyond handing out teddy bears and medicine and use what they learn from Afghan women to develop plans for income-generating projects, schools and clinics.” Captain Jason C. Brezler, who has also worked with FETs, agreed in his

interview with Bumiller: “To leverage a relationship, you have to have something of value to the Afghans, . . . and it has to be more than just, ‘I’m a girl.’”⁵³

Nonetheless, even smaller achievements are made possible simply by the fact that FETs are women now available to engage with their Afghan counterparts. “We could do things that the males cannot do, and they are starting to realize that,” Sergeant Christine Baldwin, also deployed in Afghanistan, told Baldor. Adds Stigall, “They were able to get [Afghan] women to talk about issues the men were too proud to talk about, . . . the women were able to get a pulse on the community that we couldn’t get from the men.”⁵⁴ D’Amato cited three indicators of the FETs’ success: (1) local groups started asking when they were going to build more schools for both their sons and their daughters; (2) Afghan district officials started complaining that women in their districts were becoming overly demanding, and they did not know how they were going to meet their expectations; (3) the Taliban began suggesting that they supported girls going to school in January 2011.

This last marker of success is interesting to consider in more detail. As reported in the *Guardian*, Farooq Wardak, Afghanistan’s education minister, said that the Taliban have undergone a significant change of heart in regard to female education: “It is attitudinal change, it is behavioural change, it is cultural change. What I am hearing at the very upper policy level of the Taliban is that they are no more opposing education and also girls’ education.”⁵⁵ The need to at least verbally capitulate on this point can be taken as an indicator of success: in order to move forward with peace negotiations between the Taliban and the Karzai administration, the Taliban had to assure a global audience that they would not prevent girls from being educated. From the perspective of COIN, however, such success may prevent the counterinsurgency from providing a clear alternative story for the target population. D’Amato found it difficult to have the Taliban “start creeping into your narrative.” On the other hand, if the goal is to make political progress and to provide girls with an education, it is hard to protest that an about-face is interfering with one’s military strategy.

The Question: Old Wine, New Bottles?

In our view it is unsurprising that women play a variety of roles traditionally associated with women and war: mourners, cheerleaders, camp followers—even protestors, peace activists, and peacemakers. What is more interesting, and qualitatively new, is the variety of military roles in support of the war on terror. The fact that the United States honors “our” women’s contributions and deploys them to represent “our” government by including them in the military becomes a marker of civilizational difference and superiority. The military “not only purports to defend ‘our’ womenfolk from the attacks of a barbaric enemy, but [it] also calls on a conception of feminism and women’s rights that demands the visibility of women.”⁵⁶ On all these accounts, FETs are the ideal depiction of COIN: able to operate in battle and on the home front, overcoming the gendered spatial divisions of both traditional military engagement and Afghan society in order to provide maximal strategic advantage for the United States.

Cynthia Enloe, who has studied militarization for several decades, suggests that states will begin to open positions in the military to women only when “government

strategists think they will enhance ‘national security.’”⁵⁷ Accordingly, she argues, states recruit women to: (1) make up for the loss of middle-class men due to the elimination of the draft; (2) compensate for a decline in a country’s birthrate; (3) allow governments not to recruit “too many” untrusted ethnic and racial others; (4) ensure the maintenance of higher levels of education; and—almost as a bonus, since this tends not to be an intended consequence—(5) make the government’s military look modern in the eyes of others (at home and abroad).⁵⁸

Once women are allowed into state militaries, they are confined to certain roles only, in part to assuage any worries on the part of more conservative elements who fear that allowing women into the military will feminize the endeavor. “One of the well-worn solutions has been to recruit women into the military but to channel them into what the military categorizes as ‘noncombat’ duties,” Enloe explains. “This gender-based assignment strategy, officials explain, ‘frees up men’ to do the ‘real’ soldiering.”⁵⁹ In other words, the real soldiering is the manly soldiering. Melissa Herbert, in *Camouflage Isn’t Only for Combat*, also shows how notions of soldiering as an exclusively male/manly endeavor position women soldiers in configurations in which they always have to be manly enough, but never too manly. Due to sex-role spillover, whereby a job becomes endowed with the behavioral expectations for the numerically dominant sex, “when a given occupational role is defined as masculine, many automatically challenge women’s ability or suitability to assume that role,” writes Herbert. “Women [in these roles] might be seen as deviant, and they may find that they have to work at creating an image that allows them to balance their sex-defined gender role with the gendered occupational role.”⁶⁰

Among the primary reasons that ground-combat positions have heretofore been restricted to male soldiers, according to these feminist analyses, are assumptions about the gendered attributes of these roles—not whether or not women could carry out the duties. This is true also for FETs: “Women make up only 6 percent of the Marine Corps, which cultivates an image as the most testosterone-fueled service, and they are still officially barred from combat branches like the infantry,” writes Bumiller. “But in a bureaucratic sleight of hand, used by both the Army and Marines in Iraq and Afghanistan when women have been needed for critical jobs like bomb disposal or intelligence, the female engagement teams are to be ‘attached’ to all-male infantry units within the First Marine Expeditionary Force.”⁶¹ By recognizing a unique role for FETs in the counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan, the U.S. military loudly signals that this is a new era for women in the military.

Second, FETs can be used to illustrate how innovative the counterinsurgency campaign is, that it is a tool of “soft power” to win hearts and minds rather than a standard military deployment, given that women still cannot (or presumably would not) be engaged in combat. Yet in July 2010 the FETs were pulled from their duties during a three-week review of their role in the COIN campaign in Afghanistan. Following coverage of these women soldiers’ new roles in the *New York Times*, an unidentified congressman became concerned about their vulnerability. Ultimately, they were released for service again, but under new rules meant to reinforce the ban on serving in combat positions. “The teams could not go on foot patrols primarily intended to hunt and kill the enemy, and were not allowed more than ‘temporary

stays' at the combat bases where they had been living for months." These temporary stays were decreed to last forty-five days. "To fulfill the letter but hardly the spirit of the guidelines, the female Marines now travel from their combat outposts every six weeks for an overnight stay at a big base like Camp Leatherneck, then head back out the next morning."⁶²

Third, the FETs also help justify continued intervention in Afghanistan by reinforcing U.S. civilizational superiority to the audience back home. The FETs become a marker of our cultural differences and cultural superiority on what appear to be feminist grounds: "Women are deployed to project and further this vision, occupying roles not dissimilar to those described by the account of processes of nationalist, [colonial], and ethnic projects."⁶³ Just as British suffragists either consciously or unconsciously contributed to the imperial aspirations of Britain through their appeals for inclusion, so the emergence of FETs, which underscore the unique mission to save Afghan women, also links a discourse of "global feminism" to a colonial venture: "Women's ongoing struggles for everyday freedoms are appropriated into the war project and presented as, if not quite an ethnic culture, at least an explicit demonstration of our values, the very values that are under attack and must be defended."⁶⁴ Women function, as they always have, as markers of tradition (of "our way of life") and of the boundary between us and them—between Occident and Orient.

However, women are being allowed to carry out these new duties based upon gendered assumptions, complicating the notion that the deployment of FETs signals progress for women in the U.S. military. Because of the ways in which tradition and religion condition Afghan women's lives, it is assumed that only women will have access to them—and that, because they are women, they are not "real" (read: manly) soldiers; as such, they will be perceived as nonthreatening. These assumptions are shared by both U.S. males and Afghans, as one Afghan male elder's response to the FETs suggests: "Your men come to fight, but we know the women are here to help."⁶⁵ What is more, due to the gendering of female soldiers as "not (real) male soldiers," FETs also enjoy greater access to Afghan men: "Many Pashtun men, far from shunning American women, show a preference for interacting with them over U.S. men. Pashtun men tend to view foreign women troops as a kind of 'third gender.' As a result, female servicewomen are accorded the advantages, rather than the disadvantages, of both genders: they are extended the respect shown to men, but are granted the access to home and family normally reserved to women."⁶⁶

Even though counterinsurgency doctrine and strategy are supposed to signal a new era in the military, the deployment of FETs has also exposed how incomplete the transformation of women's roles in the military is. As one might expect, given the history of women's integration into the U.S. military, there is reluctance within the ranks to fully embrace FETs due to the many gendered assumptions that accompany current combat restrictions. Captain Scott Cuomo, who identifies as a strong supporter of the FETs, described his reservations about their presence: "I think the infantry in me will have a very hard time ever accepting that I'm going to rush against the enemy and there's going to be a female right next to me . . . Can she do it? Some might. I don't know if this sounds bad, but I kind of look at everything through my wife. Is that my wife's job? No. My job is to make sure my wife is safe."⁶⁷

While FETs are making some inroads, their effectiveness is limited more by U.S. commanders than patriarchal Afghans: “Afghan culture turns out to be more flexible than many male officers have conditioned themselves to believe.”⁶⁸ In their summary of the difficulties confronting the FETs and their mission, Pottinger et al. conclude, “Perversely, our reluctance to employ all but a few allied servicewomen in tactical counterinsurgency operations mirror-images the Taliban . . . In fact, several FET members told us they were willing to extend their deployments or quickly return to Afghanistan if given the chance to be on an FET full-time. This begs another question: Who is shielding their women from Afghan society more: Pashtun men or U.S. Commanders?”⁶⁹

In the end, at least as far as the signaling function of FETs and COIN more generally is concerned, these questions may not matter as much. The attention paid to gendered counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, and in particular the deployment of FETs, has resurrected the original mission of saving (brown) women. On this reading, in line with claims by feminist security scholars, paying attention to gender reveals much more than just where the women are; it provides insight into the assumptions, means, and goals of the U.S. involvement in the war in Afghanistan. What is more, exploring these narratives highlights how gendered understandings are being employed to frame the war such that those at home may continue to support it.

Notes

1. Ann Jones, “Woman to Woman in Afghanistan,” *The Nation*, November 15, 2010.
2. The U.S. Army also began to employ specially trained female soldiers in Cultural Support Teams (CSTs) to work with special operations teams in January 2011.
3. By the time Petraeus was in charge, COIN had already become the official doctrine for Afghanistan under General Stanley McChrystal in July 2009.
4. Laleh Khalili, “Gendered Practices of Counterinsurgency,” *Review of International Studies* 37, no. 3 (2010): 1473.
5. Ibid.
6. See in particular a series of articles by Elisabeth Bumiller in the *New York Times*, individually cited below, as well as Jones, “Woman to Woman.”
7. David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 20.
8. Ibid.
9. In September 2007, Secretary Gates allocated \$40 million to develop HTS according to the blueprint provided by Montgomery McFate and Andrea Jackson in “An Organizational Solution for Department of Defense’s Cultural Knowledge Needs,” *Military Review* 85, no. 4 (2005): 18–21.
10. H.R. 5136, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2011*, 2.
11. The backlash to embedded social science was already well underway in 2009, and thousands of scholars from the AMA, AAA, and American Psychiatric and Psychological Associations signed a formal objection to Human Terrain Systems. There has been no similar objection to the FETs, which is perhaps one reason why they, not the HTS units, have played a more central role in the publicity of the counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan. In H.R. 5136, the Armed Forces Committee stated concerns about the Human Terrain System program: “While the Committee remains supportive of the Army’s Human Terrain System (HTS) to leverage social science expertise

to support operational commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is increasingly concerned that the Army has not paid sufficient attention to addressing certain concerns. The Committee encourages the Department to continue to develop a broad range of opportunities that leverage the important contributions that can be offered by social science expertise to support key missions such as irregular warfare, counterinsurgency, and stability and reconstruction operations. The bill limits the obligation of funding for HTS until the Army submits a required assessment of the program, provides revalidation of all existing operations requirements, and certifies Department-level guidelines for the use of social scientists.” H.R. 5136, 25.

12. A full transcript of this speech can be found at http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/34360743/ns/politics-white_house/t/full-text-obamas-nobel-peace-prize-speech/#.TsqPjXGHiCg (accessed November 21, 2011).

13. Roberto Gonzalez has been one of the most vocal critics of the counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan and its less conventional methods, as reflected in his analysis of the Human Terrain System. See his *American Counterinsurgency: Human Science and the Human Terrain* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2009). See also a volume by a group called the Network of Concerned Anthropologists, *Counter-Counterinsurgency* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2009).

14. George W. Bush, “Bush on State of War,” *Washington Post Archive*, October 11, 2001. Available online at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bush_text101101.html (accessed November 17, 2011). See also Maja Zehfuss, “Forget 9/11,” *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (2003): 513–28.

15. Laura Bush, “Radio Address by Laura Bush to the Nation,” 2001. Available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011117.html> (accessed September 28, 2011).

16. In 1997 the Feminist Majority launched the “Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan.” In 2002, in response to the U.S.-led invasion, this was renamed the “Campaign for Afghan Women & Girls.” See <http://feminist.org/afghan/index.asp> (accessed January 17, 2012).

17. Barbara Ehrenreich, “A Mystery of Misogyny,” *Progressive* 65, no. 12 (2001): 12–13.

18. Kim Hunt, “‘Embedded Feminism’ and the War on Terror,” in *(En)gendering the War on Terror: War Stories and Camouflaged Politics*, ed. Krista Hunt and Kim Rygiel (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 51–71; Iris Marion Young, “Feminist Reactions to the Contemporary Security Regime,” *Hypatia* 18, no. 1 (2003): 223–31; and Young, “The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State,” in *W Stands for Women: How the George W. Bush Presidency Shaped a New Politics of Gender*, ed. Micheale Ferguson and Lori Marso (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 115–39.

19. Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Dangerous Brown Men: Exploiting Sex, Violence, and Feminism in the War on Terror* (London: Zed Books, 2008), 44. Also attested to by Bush’s “war on women.” See Meghana Nayak, “Orientalism and ‘Saving’ U.S. State Identity after 9/11,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8, no. 1 (2006): 42–61.

20. Bhattacharyya, *Dangerous Brown Men*, 29.

21. This has been discussed in great detail by Bhattacharyya; refer also to Maryam Khalid, “Gender, Orientalism and Representations of the ‘Other’ in the War on Terror,” *Global Change, Peace and Security* 23, no. 1 (2011): 15–29; Nayak, “Orientalism and ‘Saving’”; and Jasmin Zine, “Between Orientalism and Fundamentalism: Muslim Women and Feminist Engagement,” in Hunt and Rygiel, eds., *(En)gendering the War on Terror*, 27–49.

22. Where freedom is all too often simply the freedom to consume: the 2002 U.S. National Security Strategy mentions free trade, private property and capitalism as much as terrorism, evil, and rogue states. Nayak, "Orientalism and 'Saving,'" 55. This is also evidenced in President Bush's plea that "we cannot let the terrorists achieve the objective of frightening our nation to the point where we don't conduct our business *or people do not shop*." Bush, "Bush on State of War," emphasis added. Laura Shepherd, "Veiled References: Constructions of Gender in the Bush Administration Discourse on the Attacks on Afghanistan Post-9/11," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8, no. 1 (2006): 19–41, also identifies the "Happy Shopper" as one of the discursive productions of the Bush administration's response to 9/11.

23. Antoinette Burton, "The Feminist Quest for Identity: British Imperial Suffragism and 'Global Sisterhood,' 1900–1915," *Journal of Women's History* 3, no. 2 (1991): 48.

24. *Ibid.*, 48–49.

25. In the context of the war on terror, see also Khalid, "Gender, Orientalism and Representations," and Nayak, "Orientalism and 'Saving.'"

26. On women's roles in relation to national and state identity, see Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997).

27. See the discussion in Margaret Kohn and Keally McBride, *Political Theories of Decolonization: Postcolonialism and the Problem of Foundations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), for more on gender and Algerian decolonization.

28. Jon Boone, "Hillary Clinton Vows to Defend Rights of Afghan Women," *Guardian*, July 20, 2010.

29. Thomas Rid, "The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Counterinsurgency Doctrine," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33, no. 5 (2010): 727–58, traces the development of counterinsurgency strategy to French campaigns in Algeria in the 1840s. For a history of the first U.S. adoption of counterinsurgency strategy, see Brian McAllister Linn, *The U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War, 1899–1902* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

30. For more on Rostow and his visions of development in war, see David Milne, *America's Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008). See also Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), for a discussion of modernization theory and development strategies during this era.

31. See Cynthia Enloe, "Womenandchildren: Making Sense of the Persian Gulf Crisis," *Village Voice*, September 25, 1990, on the conflation of women and children in international politics and the use of this trope as a justification for intervention. Feminists who have discussed the question of the way in which the civilian is gendered include Charli Carpenter, *Innocent Women and Children: Gender, Norms and the Protection of Civilians* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Khalili, "Gendered Practices of Counterinsurgency"; Helen Kinsella, *The Image before the Weapon: A Critical History of the Distinction between Combatant and Civilian* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011); and Laura Sjoberg, "Gendered Realities of the Immunity Principle: Why Gender Analysis Needs Feminism," *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2006): 889–910.

32. The tropes of the just warrior and the beautiful soul are outlined in greater detail in Jean B. Elshtain, *Women and War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

33. Khalili, "Gendered Practices of Counterinsurgency," 1487.

34. *Ibid.*, 1475.

35. One of the more revealing declarations in FM 3–24 is that "counterinsurgency is an

extremely complex form of warfare—truly ‘war at the graduate level’” (section 1–134). COIN strategists position themselves as graduate scholars of warfare with the savvy understanding of how to avoid the negative consequences of military force. FM 3–24 consistently points out how standard strategy will backfire. Nine “Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency” identified in the document imply that commanders of counterinsurgency forces will have to overcome their own training in order to run a successful campaign.

36. As in the August 9, 2010, cover of *Time*, “What Happens if We Leave Afghanistan”: <http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20100809,00.html> (accessed November 23, 2011).

37. Sheperd, “Veiled References,” 25. Shepherd quotes the classic discussion in Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 51–80.

38. As described by former Marine Corps colonel Gary Anderson in “Counterinsurgency vs. Counterterrorism: A Civilian’s View,” *Small Wars Journal*, February 24, 2010, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/counterinsurgency-vs-counterterrorism> (accessed September 28, 2011). See also David N. Santos, “Counterterrorism v. Counterinsurgency: Lessons from Algeria and Afghanistan,” *Small Wars Journal*, March 14, 2011, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/counterterrorism-v-counterinsurgency-lessons-from-algeria-and-afghanistan> (accessed September 29, 2011).

39. Staging a counterinsurgency on behalf of another government is particularly tricky, since one is immediately viewed as a foreign element and hence suspicious. If the counterinsurgency goes well, it may end up building legitimacy for the military force, not necessarily the government of the country. If it goes badly, then the counterinsurgency will just be resented as an occupying force that reveals the weakness of the standing government to repel it. This difficulty is noted in the FM 3–24 when it opines, “The host country doing something tolerably is sometimes better than us doing it well” (section 1–23).

40. Nir Rosen, “Something from Nothing: U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan,” *Boston Review* (January/February 2010), <http://bostonreview.net/BR35.1/rosen.php> (accessed November 18, 2011).

41. Jones, “Woman to Woman,” 11.

42. Lolita C. Baldor, “Death Highlights Women’s Role in Special Ops Teams,” Associated Press, October 25, 2011.

43. Matt Pottinger, Hali Jilani, and Claire Russo, “Half-Hearted: Trying to Win Afghanistan without Afghan Women,” *Small Wars Journal*, February 18, 2010, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/trying-to-win-afghanistan-without-afghan-women> (accessed January 17, 2012).

44. Pottinger et al., “Half-Hearted,” 3.

45. Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1965), 37–38.

46. See <http://regionalcommandsouthwest.wordpress.com/about/female-engagement-team-usmc> (accessed November 23, 2011).

47. Personal communications. Conversely, if one wants to destroy the memory of a place, one must also focus on the women. This has become apparent in tactics such as “genocidal rape,” a term developed in response to the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina but which has also been employed in places like the Congo, Darfur, and Rwanda. See Catharine A. MacKinnon, “Genocide’s Sexuality,” in *Are Women Human?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 209–33.

48. For a discussion of the importance of security narratives, see Annick T. R. Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach* (London: Routledge, 2011).

49. Nina D'Amato interview; see also Elisabeth Bumiller, "In Camouflage or Veil, a Fragile Bond," *New York Times*, May 29, 2010.
50. Nancy Montgomery, "New Radio Program to Help Afghans Learn to Read," *Stars and Stripes*, January 11, 2011.
51. Since FETs are attached to other units, their operational objectives are secondary to those of the units they accompany, so they haven't necessarily been able to follow up. See Jones, "Woman to Woman."
52. Ibid.
53. Bumiller, "In Camouflage or Veil." Note how Brezler's comment diminishes women's contributions to FETs by describing soldiers serving in them as girls.
54. Baldor, "Death." Note that this article, and the comments quoted above, refer to the Army's CST program, which is quite similar to the Marines' FETs. See also <http://www.soc.mil/swcs/cst/index.htm> (accessed January 17, 2012).
55. Jon Boone, "Taliban Ready to Lift Ban on Girls' School, says Minister," *Guardian*, January 13, 2011.
56. Ibid., 48.
57. Cynthia Enloe, *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 65.
58. Summarized from ibid.
59. Ibid., 83.
60. Melissa Herbert, *Camouflage Isn't Only for Combat: Gender, Sexuality and Women in the Military* (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 31–32.
61. Elisabeth Bumiller, "Letting Women Reach Women in Afghan War," *New York Times*, March 6, 2010.
62. Elisabeth Bumiller, "For Female Marines, Tea Comes with Bullets," *New York Times*, October 2, 2010.
63. Bhattacharyya, *Dangerous Brown Men*, 25.
64. Ibid., 24.
65. Pottinger et al., "Half-Hearted," 4.
66. Ibid., 2.
67. Elisabeth Bumiller, "Redefining Gender Roles in Combat," *New York Times*, May 29, 2010.
68. Pottinger et al., "Half-Hearted," 2.
69. Ibid., 9–10.