

War Frenzy and Women's Rights

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This article by Sunera Thobani, Professor of Women's Studies at the University of British Columbia and former president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women was published on the Global Research website nine years ago on 28 October 2001, three weeks after the invasion of Afghanistan by US and allied troops including Canadian forces.

My recent speech at a women's conference on violence against women has generated much controversy. In the aftermath of the terrible attacks of September 11, I argued that the U.S. response of launching 'America's new war' would increase violence against women. I situated the current crisis within the continuity of North/South relations, rooted in colonialism and imperialism. I criticized American foreign policy, as well as President Bush's racialized construction of the American Nation. Finally, I spoke of the need for solidarity with Afghan women's organizations as well as the urgent necessity for the women's movement in Canada to oppose the war.

Decontextualized and distorted media reports of my address have led to accusations of me being an academic impostor, morally bankrupt and engaging in hate-mongering. It has been fascinating to observe how my comments regarding American foreign policy, a record well documented by numerous sources whose accuracy or credentials cannot be faulted, have been dubbed 'hate-speech.' To speak about the indisputable record of U.S. backed coups, death squads, bombings and killings ironically makes me a 'hate-monger.' I was even made the subject of a 'hate-crime' complaint to the RCMP, alleging that my speech was a 'hate-crime.'

Despite the virulence of these responses, I welcome the public discussion my speech has generated as an opportunity to further the public debate about Canada's support of America's new war. When I made the speech, I believed it was imperative to have this debate before any attacks were launched on any country. Events have overtaken us with the bombing of Afghanistan underway and military rule having been declared in Pakistan. The need for this discussion has now assumed greater urgency as reports of casualties are making their way into the news. My speech at the women's conference was aimed at mobilizing the women's movement against this war. I am now glad for this opportunity to address wider constituencies and in different fora. First, however, a few words about my location: I place my work within the tradition of radical, politically engaged scholarship. I have always rejected the politics of academic elitism which insist that academics should remain above the fray of political activism and use only disembodied, objectified language and a 'properly' dispassionate professorial demeanor to establish our intellectual credentials. My work is grounded in the politics, practices and languages of the various communities I come from, and the social justice movements to which I am committed.

On American Foreign Policy

In the aftermath of the terrible September 11th attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, the Bush administration launched "America's War on Terrorism." Eschewing any role for the United Nations and the need to abide by international law, the US administration initiated an international alliance to justify its unilateral military action against Afghanistan. One of its early coalition partners was the Canadian government which committed its unequivocal support for whatever forms of assistance the United States might request. In this circumstance, it is entirely reasonable that people in Canada examine carefully the record of American foreign policy.

As I observed in my speech, this record is alarming and does not inspire confidence. In Chile, the CIA-backed coup against the democratically elected Allende government led to the deaths of over 30,000 people.

In El Salvador, the U.S. backed regime used death squads to kill about 75,000 people.

In Nicaragua, the U.S. sponsored terrorist contra war led to the deaths of over 30,000 people.

The initial bombing [1991] left over 200,000 dead, and the bombings have continued for the last ten years.

UNICEF estimates that over one million Iraqis have died, and that 5,000 more die every month as a result of the U.N. imposed sanctions, enforced in their harshest form by U.S. power.

The list does not stop here. 150,000 were killed and 50,000 disappeared in Guatemala after the 1954 CIA-sponsored coup; over 2 million were killed in Vietnam; and 200,000 before that in the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear attacks. Numerous authoritarian regimes have been backed by the United States including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the apartheid regime in South Africa, Suharto's dictatorship in Indonesia, Marcos in the Philippines, and Israel's various occupations of Lebanon, the Golan Heights and the Palestinian territories. The U.S. pattern of foreign intervention has been to overthrow leftist governments and to impose right wing regimes which in turn support U.S. interests, even if this means training and using death squads and assassinating leftist politicians and activists. To this end, it has a record of treating civilians as entirely expendable.

It is in this context that I made my comment that the United States is the largest and most dangerous global force, unleashing horrific levels of violence around the world, and that the path of U.S. foreign policy is soaked in blood. The controversy generated by this comment has surprisingly not addressed the veracity of this assessment of the U.S. record. Instead, it has focused on my tone and choice of words (inflammatory, excessive, inelegant, un-academic, angry, etc.).

Now I have to admit that my use of the words 'horrific violence' and 'soaked in blood' is very deliberate and carefully considered. I do not use these words lightly.

To successive United States administrations the deaths resulting from its policies have been just so many statistics, just so much 'collateral damage.' Rendering invisible the humanity of the peoples targeted for attack is a strategy well used to hide the impact of colonialist

and imperialist interventions. Perhaps there is no more potent a strategy of dehumanization than to proudly proclaim the accuracy and efficiency of 'smart' weapons systems, and of surgical and technological precision, while rendering invisible the suffering bodies of these peoples as disembodied statistics and mere 'collateral damage.'

The use of embodied language, grounded in the recognition of the actual blood running through these bodies, is an attempt to humanize these peoples in profoundly graphic terms. It compels us to recognize the sheer corporeality of the terrain upon which bombs rain and mass terror is waged. This language calls on 'us' to recognize that 'they' bleed just like 'we' do, that 'they' hurt and suffer just like 'us.'

We are complicit in this bloodletting when we support American wars. Witness the power of this embodiment in the shocked and horrified responses to my voice and my words, rather than to the actual horror of these events. I will be the first to admit that it is extremely unnerving to 'see' blood in the place of abstract, general categories and statistics. Yet this is what we need to be able to see if we are to understand the terrible human costs of empire-building. We have all felt the shock and pain of repeatedly witnessing the searing images of violence unleashed upon those who died in New York and Washington. The stories we have heard from their loved ones have made us feel their terrible human loss. Yet where do we witness the pain of the victims of U.S. aggression? How do we begin to grasp the extent of their loss?

Whose humanity do we choose to recognize and empathize with, and who becomes just so much 'collateral damage' to us? Anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements and theorists have long insisted on placing the bodies and experiences of marginalized others at the centre of our analysis of the social world. To fail to do so at this moment in history would be unconscionable. In the aftermath of the responses to my speech, I am more convinced than ever of the need to engage in the language and politics of embodied thinking and speaking. After all, it is the lives, and deaths, of millions of human beings we are discussing.

This is neither a controversial nor a recent demand. Feminists (such as of Mahasweta Devi, Toni Morrison, Gayatri Spivak and Patricia Williams) have forcefully drawn our attention to what is actually done to women's bodies in the course of mapping out racist colonial relations. Frantz Fanon, one of the foremost theorists of decolonization, studied and wrote about the role of violence in colonial social organization and about the psychology of oppression; but he described just as readily the bloodied, violated black bodies and the "searing bullets" and "blood-stained knives" which were the order of the day in the colonial world. Eduardo Galeano entitled one of his books

The Open Veins of Latin America and the post-colonial theorist Achille Mbembe talks of the "mortification of the flesh," of the "mutilation" and "decapitation" of oppressed bodies. Aime Cesaire's poetry pulses with the physicality of blood, pain, fury and rage in his outcry against the domination of African bodies. Even Karl Marx, recognized as one of the founding fathers of the modern social sciences, wrote trenchant critiques of capital, exploitation, and classical political economy; and did not flinch from naming the economic system he was studying 'vampire capitalism.' In attempting to draw attention to the violent effects of abstract and impersonal policies, I claim a proud intellectual pedigree.

Invoking the American Nation

In my speech I argued that in order to legitimize the imperialist aggression which the Bush administration is undertaking, the President is invoking an American nation and people as being vengeful and bloodthirsty. It is de rigueur in the social sciences to acknowledge that the notion of a 'nation' or a 'people' is socially constructed. The American nation is no exception. If we consider the language used by Bush and his administration to mobilize this nation for the war, we encounter the following: launching a crusade; operation infinite justice; fighting the forces of evil and darkness; fighting the barbarians; hunting down the evil-doers; draining the swamps of the Middle East, etc., etc. This language is very familiar to peoples who have been colonized by Europe. Its use at this moment in time reveals that it is a fundamentalist and racialized western ideology which is being mobilized to rally the troops and to build a national and international consensus in defence of 'civilization.' It suggests that anyone who hesitates to join in is also 'evil' and 'uncivilized.' In this vein, I have repeatedly been accused of supporting extremist Islamist regimes merely for criticizing US foreign policy and western colonialism.

Another tactic to mobilize support for the war has been the manipulation of public opinion. Polls conducted in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks were used to repeatedly inform us that the overwhelming majority of Americans allegedly supported a strong military retaliation. They did not know against whom, but they purportedly supported this strategy anyway. In both the use of language and these polls, we are witnessing what Noam Chomsky has called the "manufacture of consent." Richard Lowry, editor of the National Review opined, "If we flatten part of Damascus or Tehran or whatever it takes, this is part of the solution." President Bush stated, "We will bear no distinction between those who commit the terrorist attacks and those who harbour them." Even as the bombing began last weekend, he declared that the war is "broader" than against just Afghanistan, that other nations have to decide if they side with his administration or if they are "murderers and outlaws themselves." We have been asked by most public commentators to accept the calls for military aggression against "evil-doers" as natural, understandable and even reasonable, given the attacks on the United States.

I reject this position. It would be just as understandable a response to re-examine American foreign policy, to address the root causes of the violent attacks on the United States, and to make a commitment to abide by international law. In my speech, I urged women to break through this discourse of 'naturalizing' the military aggression, and recognize it for what it is, vengeful retribution and an opportunity for a crude display of American military might. We are entitled to ask: Who will make the decision regarding which 'nations' are to be labeled as "murderers" and "outlaws"? Which notions of 'justice' are to be upheld? Will the Bush administration set the standard, even as it is overtly institutionalizing racial profiling across the United States?

I make very clear distinctions between people in America and their government's call for war. Many people in America are seeking to contest the 'national' consensus being manufactured by speaking out and by organizing rallies and peace marches in major cities, about which there has been very little coverage in Canada. Irresponsible media reporting of my comments which referred to Bush's invocation of the American nation as a vengeful one deliberately took my words out of this context, repeating them in one television broadcast after another in a grossly distorted fashion.

My choice of language was, again, deliberate. I wanted to bring attention to Bush's right

wing, fundamentalist leanings and to the neo-colonialist/imperialist practices of his administration. The words 'bloodthirsty' and 'vengeful' are designations most people are quite comfortable attributing to 'savages' and to the 'uncivilized,' while the United States is represented as the beacon of democracy and civilization. The words 'bloodthirsty' and 'vengeful' make us confront the nature of the ideological justification for this war, as well as its historical roots, unsettling and discomfiting as that might be.

The Politics of Liberating Women

I have been taken to task for stating that there will be no emancipation for women anywhere until western domination of the planet is ended. In my speech I pointed to the importance of Afghanistan for its strategic location near Central Asia's vast resources of oil and natural gas. I think there is very little argument that the West continues to dominate and consume a vast share of the world's resources.

This is not a controversial statement. Many prominent intellectuals, journalists and activists alike, have pointed out that this domination is rooted in the history of colonialism and rests on the ongoing maintenance of the North/South divide, and that it will continue to provoke violence and resistance across the planet. I argued that in the current climate of escalating militarism, there will be precious little emancipation for women, either in the countries of the North or the South.

In the specific case of Afghanistan, it was the American administration's economic and political interests which led to its initial support for, and arming of, Hekmatyar's Hezb i Islami and its support for Pakistan's collaboration in, and organization of, the Taliban regime in the mid-1990s. According to the Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid, the United States and Unocal conducted negotiations with the Taliban for an oil pipeline through Afghanistan for years in the mid-1990s. We have seen the horrendous consequences this has had for women in Afghanistan. When Afghan women's groups were calling attention to this U.S. support as a major factor in the Taliban regime's coming to power, we did not heed them.

We did not recognize that Afghan women's groups were in the front line resisting the Taliban and its Islamist predecessors, including the present militias of the Northern Alliance. Instead, we chose to see them only as 'victims' of 'Islamic culture,' to be pitied and 'saved' by the West. Time and time again, third world feminists have pointed out to us the pitfalls of rendering invisible the agency and resistance of women of the South, and of reducing women's oppression to various third world 'cultures.' Many continue to ignore these insights.

Now, the U.S. administration has thrown its support behind the Northern Alliance, even as Afghan women's groups oppose the U.S. military attacks on Afghanistan, and raise serious concerns about the record of the Northern Alliance in perpetuating human rights abuses and violence against women in the country. If we listen to the voices of these women, we will very quickly be disabused of the notion that U.S. military intervention is going to lead to the emancipation of women in Afghanistan.

Even before the bombings began, hundreds of thousands of Afghan women were compelled to flee their homes and communities, and to become refugees. The bombings of Kabul, Kandahar, Jalalabad and other cities in the country will result in further loss of life, including the lives of women and children. Over three million Afghan refugees are now on the move in the wake of the U.S. attacks. How on earth can we justify these bombings in the name of

furthering women's emancipation?

My second point was that imperialism and militarism do not further women's liberation in western countries either. Women have to be brought into line to support racist imperialist goals and practices, and they have to live with the men who have been brutalized in the waging of war when these men come back. Men who kill women and children abroad are hardly likely to come back cured of the effects of this brutalization. Again, this is not a very controversial point of view. Women are taught to support military aggressions, which is then presented as being in their 'national' interest. These are hardly the conditions in which women's freedoms can be furthered. As a very small illustration, just witness the very public vilification I have been subjected to for speaking out in opposition to this war.

I have been asked by my detractors that if I, as a woman, I am so critical of western domination, why do I live here? It could just as readily be asked of them that if they are so contemptuous of the non-western world, why do they so fervently desire the oil, trade, cheap labour and other resources of that world? Challenges to our presence in the West have long been answered by people of colour who say, We are here because you were (are?) there! Migrants find ourselves in multiple locations for a myriad of reasons, personal, historical and political. Wherever we reside, however, we claim the right to speak and participate in public life.

Closing Words

My speech was made to rally the women's movement in Canada to oppose the war. Journalists and editors across the country have called me idiotic, foolish, stupid and just plain nutty. While a few journalists and columnists have attempted balanced coverage of my speech, too many sectors of the media have resorted to vicious personal attacks. Like others, I must express a concern that this passes for intelligent commentary in the mainstream media. The manner in which I have been vilified is difficult to understand, unless one sees it as a visceral response to an 'ungrateful immigrant' or an uppity woman of colour who dares to speak out. Vituperation and ridicule are two of the most common forms of silencing dissent.

The subsequent harassment and intimidation which I have experienced, as have some of my colleagues, confirms that the suppression of debate is more important to many supporters of the current frenzied war rhetoric than is the open discussion of policy and its effects. Fortunately, I have also received strong messages of support. Day by day the opposition to this unconscionable war is growing in Canada and all over the world.

I would like to thank all of my family, friends, colleagues and allies who have supported and encouraged me.

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