

# Fighting Words: Obama, Masculinity and the Rhetoric of War

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More than a few scholars have emphasized the democratic and dialogic character of President Barack Obama's rhetoric, especially in contrast to that of his main rivals in the 2008 presidential campaign (Ivie and Giner, Murphy, Rowland and Jones). While this characterization has merit in some areas, Obama's rhetoric is neither dialogic nor democratizing when he speaks about national security. On issues of national security, both during the campaign and after becoming president, Obama favours the standard-issue idiom of militarism and American exceptionalism that has characterized the rhetoric of presidents from both parties since World War II.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, his December 2009 decision to escalate military violence in Afghanistan is testimony to the power of the dominant paradigms of national security thinking in his rhetoric and his policies. Bonnie Mann argues that the suasive force of national security common sense in the United States is substantially provided by "the style of national manhood" (180). By style, Mann refers to the "aesthetic" of masculinity that is "[...] carried by stories and images more than by argument or reason" and that functions to orient our sense of what is legitimate, normal and right (and their opposites). The style of national manhood is hinged to broader political styles so that, for example, support for war becomes "[...] an intentional posture lived viscerally, a matter of who we are as a nation rather than a thoughtful commitment to the justice of a cause" (180). In a similar vein, this paper argues that Obama's national security rhetoric is based upon, and oriented by, the logic of American masculinity, and more specifically by the forms of presidential masculinity that are imbricated with national security thinking in our political culture.

To make this argument, I begin with an analysis of the apparent differences between the national security rhetoric and policies of George W. Bush and those of Barack Obama. This is important because much of Obama's success in the 2008 electoral campaign was due to his promise of a new beginning in our approach to terrorism and security (Bostdorff). Also, many pundits and critics have praised his rhetoric in this arena in terms of a dramatic contrast between the two presidents, referring to Obama's appeals

to soft rather than hard power, and to his performance of a more democratic, less authoritarian leadership style in the global community (Bostdorff, Ivie and Giner, Landreau). My argument swims against this current in that I characterize both Obama's national security policies, and his performance of presidential masculinity, in a line of continuity with Bush. I substantiate this conclusion with a close analysis of three of Obama's speeches. First, I look at Obama's speech in acceptance of the Democratic Nomination in August, 2008. This speech is important because it reveals a great deal about the gravitational force of masculinity in national security rhetoric as Obama shifts his attention from the Democratic primary against a female candidate who was too militaristic for Democratic voters, to the general election campaign against a male candidate with especially strong national security credentials. Then, I turn to the two major speeches in December 2009 in which Obama justifies and explains the aggressive use of U.S. military violence in the Middle East: these are the speech announcing the escalation of the war in Afghanistan at West Point, and the speech in acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize.

### **Obama as the anti-Bush: the Rhetoric of a New Beginning**

Both during his campaign, and in his presidential inauguration speech, Barack Obama promised a "new beginning" in American foreign and national security policy (especially in relation to the Middle East) that would both keep us safe from enemies and "restore our moral standing" (Obama, Acceptance). In particular, this new beginning promised to distance U.S. foreign policy from the grim (and largely illegal) features of the Bush administration's "war on terror" such as the executive sanctioning of the torture of prisoners, the maintenance of a gulag of foreign detention centres where prisoners could be treated outside the guidelines of U.S. and international law, and illegal secret initiatives such as the program to assassinate Al-Qaeda operatives directed by Vice President Cheney (Mazzetti and Shane). In his first day in the White House, on January 22, 2009, Obama issued three executive orders that followed through on this promise.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these early executive orders, in the days and months following his election Obama showed great rhetorical sensitivity to the wide-spread negative perception in the Middle East of U.S. imperial behavior and designs, its uncritical support of Israel, and its disregard for civilian casualties and for the civil rights of prisoners. In an effort to reverse the tide of anti-American feeling, Obama's first post-inaugural

interview was given to Hisham Melhem of Al Arabiya TV news (Interview). This was followed in April and May by major addresses in Ankara and Cairo whose primary intended audience was Middle Eastern and, more broadly, Islamic. Both of these speeches articulate a new rhetoric of hope for U.S.-Middle Eastern relations. In the speech to the Turkish parliament, for example, Obama declares:

I [...] want to be clear that America's relationship with the Muslim community, the Muslim world, cannot, and will not, just be based upon opposition to terrorism. We seek broader engagement based on mutual interest and mutual respect. We will listen carefully, we will bridge misunderstandings, and we will seek common ground. We will be respectful, even when we do not agree [...]. (para. 38)

Hope for a new era of U.S - Middle East relations is here embodied by an attitude of respect, by a willingness to negotiate differences and find areas of mutual interest, and by an explicit criticism of the unilateral and monologic focus of the Bush administration on the 'war on terror'.

This apparent change in direction in national security and foreign policy seems to be characterized by an alternate version of presidential masculinity and by an alternate telling of the myth of American exceptionalism. Many have commented on the muscular character of George W. Bush's rhetoric of war and national security. Indeed, his policies in what he called the 'war on terror' depended almost exclusively on what Joseph Nye famously called "hard power", and were justified rhetorically by a conspicuously militarist and masculinist narrative about America's role in world history and politics.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the "[...] stern projection of a tough national persona" (Ivie and Giner 288) in Bush's rhetoric and policies, Obama seems to articulate a gentler, more reasoned approach to national security and terrorism that includes the use of "hard" military power but also depends importantly on 'soft' power in the form of diplomacy, international cooperation, and an emphasis on human rights, economic stability and political freedom. Ivie and Giner argue that the success of Obama's rhetorical appeal to 'soft' power during the 2008 presidential campaign was due to his ability to harness and resignify the deeply-resonant myth of American exceptionalism for a more democratic and community-minded projection of

America's role in world affairs. In Obama's version of national security, they write:

A less tragic sense of order mandated a reduced sense of guilt and thereby decreased the need for redemption via the cult of killing. This expression of national mission in more democratic and practical terms indicated, at least "logologically," the possibility of aligning public culture with a more global and constructive perspective on matters of national security. It revealed the possibility of a founding myth reformed to relax the lethal grip of the Evil One on the conscience of a nation that might do more good in the world if it were burdened less by tragic guilt.<sup>4</sup> (296)

This conclusion requires a retrospective reassessment in the light of Obama's decision to escalate the war in Afghanistan. How do we reconcile Obama's seemingly dramatic shift from progressive presidential candidate who was proud to have opposed the war in Iraq from the beginning, and who abolished the use of torture and illegal detention in his first day in office, to the president who in December 2009 made the decision to pursue and significantly escalate military violence in Afghanistan? How do we reconcile Obama's seemingly contradictory use of both the soft rhetoric of hope and diplomacy and the hard rhetoric of fear and military violence in his national security statements and speeches?

In the analysis that follows I argue that while Obama at times articulates a softer version of foreign policy, and seems to perform a softer, more inclusive presidential masculinity in the area of global politics and terrorism, this does not fundamentally signify a different orientation to national security as some have argued. I emphasize how Obama's rhetoric and policies fall within the standard rhetorical oscillations that constitute the myth of American exceptionalism and presidential masculinity, and that those oscillations are principally and most significantly oriented by the more militarist and conventionally masculinist versions of the myth.

### **Presidential Masculinity in the Democratic Nomination Speech**

Obama's speech at the Democratic National Convention in August 2008 marks the formal shift of his campaign focus from Democratic

Party voters towards a national audience, and from his rivalry with Hillary Clinton to a campaign against John McCain. In terms of Obama's national security rhetoric, this is a fascinating moment because, in this new broader context, he makes an attitudinal shift to a more militarized and masculinized mode of speech. In fact, Obama's performance of soft masculinity on issues of national security during the primary campaign was an opportune product of the moment that did not reflect the principal orientation of his thinking.<sup>5</sup> This is quite clear in the nomination speech as he shifts his campaign towards a more conservative national audience, and directs his attention from a female rival to a male rival with military credentials.

Obama's first sentence about foreign policy in the nomination speech concerns his own stature and ability to lead American troops into battle, and to battle John McCain for the position of commander in chief. "If John McCain wants to have a debate about who has the temperament and judgment to serve as the next commander-in-chief, that's a debate I'm ready to have." (para. 79) What is most interesting about this lead-in to the topic of national security, terrorism, and foreign policy is that its main rhetorical function is to emphasize Obama's masculine capability. It does this by declaring his presidential mettle, but also through the performance of an 'I dare you' challenge to his political adversary. It seems to say, 'if you want to fight, then let's fight. Bring it on!'

Why does Obama begin this section of the speech with a flexing of muscle? In part, it has to do with the histrionics of presidential campaigns, and in this particular campaign with the anticipated challenge to Obama's military masculinity from John McCain, a candidate with a powerful story of military bravery and heroism to his credit. At the same time, the foregrounding of presidential masculinity in terms of the resolve and capacity to lead the armed forces into battle is nothing unusual. The most significant human protagonist in the narrative of American exceptionalism is almost always the figure of the president. This is especially true in times of danger, crisis or war. He is the commander in chief of the armed forces. To him goes the job of protecting the national family from outside threats and danger. To do this effectively, he must be brave, decisive and rational. He cannot afford to be feminized by being overly emotional or sympathetic to others; he cannot succumb to doubts, or become scared to act (Cohn, Cuordileone, Hopper, Lakoff, Sylvester, Tickner, Young). It is to this mythos that Obama's

beginning performance of masculinity in the speech belongs. In the new context of a national audience, it stands out as a deeply-felt and vigorously articulated orientation towards national security.

After this initial show of male plumage, Obama continues the foreign policy section of the nomination speech by contrasting his youthful masculinity to McCain's elderly, bumbling masculinity.

For -- for while -- while Senator McCain was turning his sights to Iraq just days after 9/11, I stood up and opposed this war, knowing that it would distract us from the real threats that we face. When John McCain said we could just muddle through in Afghanistan, I argued for more resources and more troops to finish the fight against the terrorists who actually attacked us on 9/11, and made clear that we must take out Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants if we have them in our sights. (para. 80-81)

While McCain turns his sights away from the target, Obama stands up. While McCain muddles, Obama works to finish the fight and "take out" bin Laden if he's "in our sights." In the subtly crafted metaphor of aiming a gun at an enemy that organizes the passage, McCain appears as a distracted old soldier who aims at the wrong target and is generally confused. In contrast, vigorous and youthful, Obama stands up purposely, aims at the target, and fires. These metaphors all work to highlight the differences between McCain and Obama in terms of their embodiment of a properly militarized masculinity: which candidate can stand up, correctly identify the enemy, and fire the necessary shots to kill him.

Obama criticizes McCain for standing alone in "stubborn refusal" to recognize the realities of the conflict (that it is with al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, not in Iraq), and therefore for lacking judgment. This lack of judgment is also narrated in terms of a contrast between a youthful and an aging masculinity: "We need a president who can face the threats of the future, not keep grasping at the ideas of the past." (para. 84) Obama declares. The contrast between a man who grasps at the past and one who "faces" the future is coded with messages about age and masculinity: youthful, confident stepping forward into the future versus old, unsteady back-stepping towards the past. At stake in this contrast is which strategy will "defeat" the enemy. "You don't defeat -- you don't

defeat a terrorist network that operates in 80 countries by occupying Iraq", (para. 85) Obama argues. These are enemies who must be killed in order to protect the nation. To do this requires a commander-in-chief with masculine resolve and courage who can lead us into battle. This is not work for touchy-feely idealists who want to understand, communicate, and negotiate. And Republicans, Obama points out proudly, are not the only ones with the proper testicular size to lead the army into battle: "We are the party of Roosevelt. We are the party of Kennedy. So don't tell me that Democrats won't defend this country. Don't tell me that Democrats won't keep us safe." (para. 87) As in his opening statement, part of the effectiveness of these lines is their performance of a kind of "I'm up to the challenge masculinity" that talks tough, is aggressive with challengers ("don't tell me"), and does not back down. The rhetoric of American exceptionalism and presidential masculinity foregrounded here in the nomination clearly constitutes the dominant note of continuity in Obama's national security thinking. This is most evident in his two speeches from December 2009 in which he justifies his decision to escalate the war in Afghanistan as the following discussion will show.

### **Reasons for War: the December 1, 2009 Speech at West Point**

Obama's December 2009 speech at West Point argues for the strategic necessity and ethical correctness of increased war effort in Afghanistan on the basis of history. The history begins with the 19 Al Qaeda operatives who committed the terrorist atrocities on 9/11 and moves quickly to focus on the Taliban who provided them with a secure base from which to operate. After 9/11, as Obama tells the story, we made great military inroads against the Taliban and Al Qaeda, but then mistakenly turned our attention to Iraq. This provided an opening for the Taliban, and for Al Qaeda, who are now coming back into Afghanistan from Pakistan. The Afghan government cannot fight them off and therefore, he says, summing it all up: "In short, the status quo is not sustainable" (para. 12). How does a rudimentary history like this serve as an explanation or justification for war? What is the mediating logic?

The over-simplification of contemporary U.S and Afghan history entailed in this schematic narrative is head-spinning.<sup>6</sup> But, even putting that aside, if one accepts the history at face value, it is still the case that our commitment to war is left unexplained and

unjustified by the narrative. The history begins with 19 terrorists, and ends with the large-scale military action on the part of the United States. Should it not take a lot more than saying, 'well, the Taliban are gaining momentum and, remember, they are best friends with Al Qaeda' to justify the deployment of 100,000 U.S. troops, predator drones strikes all over northern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan, full involvement of the CIA, major flows of capital and materiel, and huge contracts with private military contractors like XE Services (aka Blackwater)? Obama's historical narrative simply does not add up to a political argument for this kind of war, and for this kind of outlay of capital.

As a justification for war, it seems, rather, to be structured like a myth in the sense that Roland Barthes gave the word. Myth, according to Barthes, is paradoxically effective because, formally, it works like an alibi. It is an explanation based on an absence of evidence and meaning rather than its presence. In an alibi (the accused was absent not present at the scene) the meaning and the evidence are always elsewhere (121-127). Obama's narrative amounts to a mythological explanation for war in the sense that its significance lies not in the history itself but in the formal seriousness of a president telling a story to justify war. That is, its significance lies in the rhetorical gesture that serves to remind the audience of the president's authority as commander in chief and of his role to defend the nation from harm. By telling this story the president in effect quotes an array of motives, intentions, plot sequences and characters that are formally full even if their content in this instance is misleading or empty. To paraphrase Hayden White, in this case the content is the form. Here, the details of the story of the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan are significant to the extent that they play a role in a larger narrative already familiar to the American audience: the United States stands for peace and prosperity, freedom and democracy but sometimes it is attacked by evil enemies whose irrational desire is to destroy all that is good. In that circumstance, the president must protect the national family through the use of military violence. War is the best - and, in fact, the only - way to make ourselves secure.

Following this schematic historical narrative with which he begins the West Point speech, Obama reassures the audience that his final decision to escalate the war was taken only after a serious and difficult deliberative process. This process, he says, "has allowed me to ask the hard questions, and to explore all the different options,



along with my national security team, our military and civilian leadership in Afghanistan, and our key partners. And given the stakes involved, I owed the American people -- and our troops -- no less." (para. 13) The image of the president very seriously asking questions, exploring options, and consulting experts is one intended to produce a sense of citizen confidence both in the decision and in the decider (as George W. Bush famously called himself) again without revealing any of the details or particulars that constitute the decision. The rhetorical appeal here is essentially charismatic and depends on thick cultural associations with the president as benevolent paternal authority, and as rational but determined protector of the nation. The tone of the passage is that of a father reassuring his family that the big decision he has made today was made with great care, and with their communal welfare in mind.

Obama's stress on his careful deliberation process – but not on the content of the deliberation – is reminiscent of Iris Marion Young's emphasis on the "logic of masculinist protection" in national security thinking. This is a logic that connects the protective role of the father in the patriarchal family with the role of commander in chief. In both cases, she argues that one of the prices exacted by benevolent masculinist protection is that the protected woman/feminized citizen must concede "critical distance from decision-making autonomy." (120). In other words, if the fatherly president's allegiance to citizens and soldiers is expressed in the mindfulness with which he makes communal decisions of this magnitude, then it is equally true that our allegiance to the father-president is expressed in our acceptance of his authority and judgment to do what is best for us in these circumstances. The allegiance to the father quickly becomes the measure of our patriotism. As a rhetorical strategy, then, Obama's description of the seriousness of his decision-making process serves to legitimate his decision to escalate war through an appeal to an image of protective presidential masculinity. This appeal interpellates the audience in the role of a complicit, feminized citizenry that needs such fatherly protection.<sup>7</sup>

After the scant historical review, and a summary of where we are and why we are obliged to go to war, Obama devotes a good portion of the West Point speech to making a series of sequential points, statements of fact, and reasoned arguments. For example, he gives three specific goals for the Afghan intervention, and outlines how those goals will be achieved and how it will all be paid for. He also

identifies three possible objections to the escalation and gives reasoned arguments for why these criticisms are incorrect. In sum, he says "As President, I refuse to set goals that go beyond our responsibility, our means, or our interests." (para. 37). As feminist International Relations scholars have argued, to talk about war in rationalist terms as Obama does here tends to divert attention from the cruelties of war, and to imagine the truth of war "abstracted from bodies" (Ruddick 132). It becomes difficult, in this context, to focus on, or give weight to, the terrible details of war, and in particular to the death and destruction that modern wars exact mostly from civilians not soldiers.<sup>8</sup> As a rhetorical performance, the description of war in terms of rational sequences and formulas also tends to give authority to the rhetorician himself by distancing him from feminized forms of emotionality or care work (Cohn).

Obama ends his speech with the conclusion that presidential war speeches commonly have: an eloquent and solemn call to unity and patriotism. "Now, let me be clear: None of this will be easy. The struggle against violent extremism will not be finished quickly, and it extends well beyond Afghanistan and Pakistan. It will be an enduring test of our free society, and our leadership in the world." (para. 41) The logic of a bond between our free society and our leadership in the world is presupposed rather than described or explained. Like all heroes, the hero of the exceptionalist narrative faces a test. In this instance, he is us, and our essential quality of being a free society is linked to our dominance in the world.

Since the days of Franklin Roosevelt, and the service and sacrifice of our grandparents and great-grandparents, our country has borne a special burden in global affairs. We have spilled American blood in many countries on multiple continents. We have spent our revenue to help others rebuild from rubble and develop their own economies. We have joined with others to develop an architecture of institutions -- from the United Nations to NATO to the World Bank -- that provide for the common security and prosperity of human beings.

We have not always been thanked for these efforts, and we have at times made mistakes. But more than any other nation, the United States of America has underwritten global security for over six decades -- a time that, for all its problems, has seen walls come down, and markets open, and

billions lifted from poverty, unparalleled scientific progress and advancing frontiers of human liberty.

For unlike the great powers of old, we have not sought world domination. Our union was founded in resistance to oppression. We do not seek to occupy other nations. We will not claim another nation's resources or target other peoples because their faith or ethnicity is different from ours. What we have fought for -- what we continue to fight for -- is a better future for our children and grandchildren. And we believe that their lives will be better if other peoples' children and grandchildren can live in freedom and access opportunity (para. 47-49).

Unlike other world powers, we are benevolent, seeking only that which will make the world a better place. We are, that is to say, a world power but not a world empire. Our history shows this: our military violence and our leadership have underwritten global security for over sixty years. Strangely, though, our fatherly sacrifice to protect the world from harm is sometimes misunderstood, and "we have not always been thanked for our efforts." Who are the unthankful and what is their story? In the standard-issue exceptionalist narrative, they are the enemies of freedom, the sowers of chaos, and the ideologically possessed. Obama certainly believes this. At the same time, the statement that "we have not always been thanked for our efforts" also expresses a deep anxiety about the details and the stories that are erased by the great father's version of history.

### **Making War, Talking Peace: The Nobel Peace Prize Speech**

The Nobel Prize acceptance speech, given just nine days after Obama's announcement of the escalation of the war in Afghanistan, provides a fascinating expansion of the plot of "American as good vs. foreign as evil" that informs the narrative justification for war in the West Point speech. In this speech, Obama contextualizes both American exceptionalism in general, and his specific decision to expand the war in Afghanistan, in a sweeping historical narrative of global progress. "At the dawn of history," Obama declares, "war was routinely pursued between tribes and peoples quite simply as a way of 'seeking power and settling disputes.'" (para. 6) Later, as "man" progressed, legal and diplomatic efforts were made in an attempt to

regulate war and the way it was pursued. Obama invokes just war theory citing it as one of the principle ways in which humans have tried to regulate and civilize war. In Obama's narrative, the United States is located at the upper end of this historical progression because it is the United States that has provided the leadership to produce the global "architecture" of peace in the form of the United Nations, support for human rights, nuclear arms reductions, and so on. Elaborating on the schematic history of the United States that appeared in the West Point speech, Obama says

The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms. The service and sacrifice of our men and women in uniform has promoted peace and prosperity from Germany to Korea, and enabled democracy to take hold in places like the Balkans. We have borne this burden not because we seek to impose our will. We have done so out of enlightened self-interest -- because we seek a better future for our children and grandchildren, and we believe that their lives will be better if others' children and grandchildren can live in freedom and prosperity (para. 18).

J. Ann Tickner argues that the idea of enlightened self interest corresponds to a masculinist model of international relations in which states are systematic and instrumental - they are competitive "profit maximizers that pursue power and autonomy in an anarchic world system."<sup>(52)</sup> In this context, if international cooperation exists, it is explained not in terms of community or an interdependent notion of security and welfare, but rather in terms of rational choice and enlightened self-interest. Here, in Obama's version, we shoulder the burden of world peace and prosperity both heroically (with American blood and military power) but also as rational actors. We act not as an imperial power, but as a benign power exercising rational choices in a dangerous world in order to protect our interests. By virtue of the incantatory power of the exceptionalist narrative, our interests are identical with democratic values and the cause of economic justice.

The awkward context of the Nobel Prize speech both clarifies and complicates Obama's justification of war. While acknowledging the "moral force" of the theory of non-violence, he also argues that "evil does exist in the world" and that a realist assessment of the world "as it is" sometimes requires violence. This part of the speech is quite subtle, shuttling back and forth between the recognition that

war is terrible and the insistence that it is sometimes necessary. The notion that war is sometimes just and sometimes necessary for building peace is modified throughout with an appeal to "responsibility" and to the rational, measured use of military violence. Obama argues that "all responsible nations must embrace the role that militaries with a clear mandate can play to keep the peace." (para. 26) The rationalist tone of responsibility and militaries with clear mandates is matched by Obama's framing of the philosophical question of war and peace as a matter of human imperfection. The ideals of peace are beautiful, but in the world as it is human beings are not perfect. They sometimes act unaccountably and irresponsibly. And sometimes they must be stopped from perpetrating evil.

At the end of the speech, Obama signals what for him is the chief human imperfection that is at the root of so much of the world's violence. He says, As the world grows smaller, you might think it would be easier for human beings to recognize how similar we are; to understand that we're all basically seeking the same things; that we all hope for the chance to live out our lives with some measure of happiness and fulfillment for ourselves and our families.

And yet somehow, given the dizzying pace of globalization, the cultural leveling of modernity, it perhaps comes as no surprise that people fear the loss of what they cherish in their particular identities -- their race, their tribe, and perhaps most powerfully their religion. In some places, this fear has led to conflict. At times, it even feels like we're moving backwards. We see it in the Middle East, as the conflict between Arabs and Jews seems to harden. We see it in nations that are torn asunder by tribal lines.

And most dangerously, we see it in the way that religion is used to justify the murder of innocents by those who have distorted and defiled the great religion of Islam, and who attacked my country from Afghanistan. These extremists are not the first to kill in the name of God; the cruelties of the Crusades are amply recorded. But they remind us that no Holy War can ever be a just war (para. 47-49).

In the context of globalization, what jams the machine is fear of loss of identity. This fear also gets in the way of our universal

human aspirations for peace and prosperity. The most notable example of this kind of fear is, of course, the terrorism practiced by al Qaeda. This is a fear underwritten by megalomania: the idea that violence is mandated by God. What is striking about this passage is that it plots opposition to globalization as fear of change, almost as a kind of primitive or childish clinging to identity in a world whose universal characteristics are evident. But can this be the whole story? Can one explain the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, as Obama appears to do here, as irrational fear of loss of identity? Is opposition to capitalist globalization American-style, and under the paternal arm of American power, always and everywhere a form of childishness or partial vision?

In his concluding comments, Obama quotes Martin Luther King's 1964 Nobel Prize acceptance speech in which he talks about the moral necessity of striving for what ought to be rather than accepting things as they are. This is an eloquent but highly impertinent frame for the speech. In his Nobel address, King soundly rejects those versions of history organized around notions of necessary violence. Accepting the prize on behalf of the entire civil rights movement, King says:

After contemplation, I conclude that this award which I receive on behalf of that movement is a profound recognition that nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral question of our time - the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression. Civilization and violence are antithetical concepts. Negroes of the United States, following the people of India, have demonstrated that nonviolence is not sterile passivity, but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation. Sooner or later all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace, and thereby transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. If this is to be achieved, man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love (para. 4).

King clearly rejects the idea that civilization sometimes requires violence, or that violence can sometimes be just or moral. Love, in King's terms, is antithetical to the discourse of innocence, guilt,

power and violence that constitutes the narrative of American exceptionalism. Instead, King's ethic of love is consonant with Judith Butler's critique of violence:

The violent response is the one that does not ask, and does not seek to know. It wants to shore up what it knows, to expunge what threatens it with not-knowing, what forces it to reconsider the presuppositions of its world, their contingency, their malleability. The nonviolent response lives with its unknowingness about the Other in the face of the Other, since sustaining the bond that the question opens is finally more valuable than knowing in advance what holds us in common, as if we already have all the resources we need to know what defines the human, what its future life might be (35).

This is precisely what is wrong with the narrative of American exceptionalism, and with Obama's obligation to it. A story whose plot is organized entirely around the character of its hero does not seek to know. It is narcissistic. It shores up what it knows in fear of the Other, and in this gesture reconfirms that its view of the world is the truth. Obama seems oblivious to the contradictions in his assertion of American power as he struggles here to articulate the oxymoron of peace through war. In the end, what "makes sense" in his justification for war is the cultural and political sense that adheres to the image of embodied presidential masculinity, and to his military leadership performed in patriotic service to America's heroic global mission.

## **Conclusion**

Obama's national security policies and rhetoric are, to be fair, significantly different in many ways than Bush's. Nonetheless, he steeps his rhetoric of hope for a new foreign policy in the old, familiar language of American exceptionalism. This illustrates how the political logic of a militarized and masculinized nation, presidency and citizenry has proved to be more enduring, significant and powerful than the strategy differences that have divided Democrats and Republicans over the last 60 years. It is important also because the cultural logic of American exceptionalism guaranteed by military power makes so many questions difficult to ask because the questions themselves seem absurd, effeminately naïve, or simply out of rhetorical limits. These are unasked questions such as what violence was required to achieve our

affluence and power? How can that violence be justified? Are there models for world peace, prosperity and freedom other than America's dominance and "leadership?" Does military power and violence produce security? What constitutes security? Is invulnerability a legitimate security goal? Is the authority of Commander-in-chief one that automatically adheres to the presidency at all times, or should the executive be more limited in its power as originally envisioned in the Constitution? Is citizenship best characterized in terms of a militarized and masculinized patriotism? Can terrorism be fought with large-scale military tactics?

Of course, it is impossible to know all the ins and outs of how Obama and his advisors reached the decision to escalate the war in Afghanistan. For those who voted for Obama over Clinton during the Democratic primary campaign because of his clear-spoken commitment to a different kind of foreign policy, the decision is disappointing to say the least. In the final analysis, when the decision was made, and its justification needed to be formulated into public rhetoric, what is clear is that the Obama administration felt at home in – and oriented by – the old language of American exceptionalism. Familiar orientations, as Sara Ahmed argues, are an "effect of inhabitance." That is, their sense, their familiarity and their surety are products of their alignment with an already aligned world (7). My argument here is that the sense Obama makes of war is indebted to – and made possible by – the familiarity and common-sense orientation of American exceptionalism. If the militarism and masculinism of his national security logic seem sensible or reassuring, it is because they are oriented in deeply familiar ways. The rhetoric of war and national security also works, of course, to recreate the familiar orientation from which it emerges. As Susan Jeffords argues, in the post-Vietnam context, heroic narratives about the war had the decisive (but indirectly manifested) effect of "remasculinizing American culture." This is why the work of disorientation that is proposed by feminist International Relations scholars and activists – with its specific focus on the hidden injuries of gender in the familiar discourses of war and security – is so important. It is also why it is so difficult.

I have argued that Obama's war logic is oriented by, and serves to reorient us towards, a national mythology grounded in narratives of glorified violence and masculinity. The difficulty of challenging and disorienting that prevailing narrative is eloquently described by Jorge Luis Borges in his story "The South." The story serves as an



apt allegory of the mythology of American exceptionalism with its multiple commitments to masculinity and violence, and for the ways this mythology works to make military violence the seemingly inevitable and sensible locus where the national story is both resolved and reinvigorated. The main character in "The South" is named Juan Dahlmann. Dahlmann feels "deeply Argentine" despite the fact that his paternal grandfather was a northern European immigrant. Dahlmann's patriotic sense of identity involves, among other things, having purchased a little ranch in the south that had once been in his mother's family. Dahlmann lives in Buenos Aires, and for him the south has tremendous symbolic resonance as that place that retains the masculinist features of national mythology: the pampa, the gaucho, the singing bard, the tavern, the duel. Dahlmann dreams about the ranch and its old house, and takes comfort in imagining it waiting for him on the pampa, even though he never really gets a chance to actually go there. One day, Dahlmann is struck gravely ill with a terrible infection and is hospitalized with high fever. As is typical of so many of Borges' stories, it is impossible to tell if the subsequent narrated events are products of his hallucinatory state or are really happening to him. In any event, after some days of medical intervention, he is released and boards a train towards the south to convalesce at his ranch. He arrives, enters a tavern where he eats barbeque and drinks wine, and then is taunted by some young men who have been drinking too much. Although the bar owner tells him to pay them no mind, Dahlmann confronts them as any traditional male character in a gaucho story would be required to do. In seeming recognition of his decisive entrance into one of the enduring storylines of nationalist mythology (the knife fight between men at a watering hole on the pampa), the ancient gaucho in the corner of the bar who until now has remained motionless as if frozen in time, becomes "ecstatic" and throws him a dagger. The rest is preordained: Dahlmann will walk out of the tavern with a knife in his hand, he will fight bravely, and then die with the stranger's blade in his gut. It is, the narrator says, "as if the South had decided that Dahlmann should agree to the duel." (203) When he picks up the dagger, he feels two things: first, "that this almost instinctive act committed him to fighting" and, second, "that, in his clumsy hand, the weapon would not serve to defend him, but rather to justify their killing of him" (Borges, 203 - translations mine).

For me, "The South" is a story about the masculinist mythology of national identity and violence. Intricate and contradictory - is it

dream or reality? – the myth exercises its force both from within on Dahlmann's imagination and from without on his body. The logic of a militarized and masculinized rhetoric of national security, in concert with the economic logic of our military budget and the imperial logic of our global ambition, serves as our "south" leading us onward towards the use of large-scale military violence as if in a dream from which we cannot wake. We cannot hear the warnings of the barkeep who tries to tell us that we do not have to kill or be killed in this instance. Like Dahlmann, our politicians – even the less bellicose among them – when faced with security threats simply cannot imagine any alternative to masculinist bravado and the duel to the death.

"The South", then, is a cautionary tale. As long as presidents and politicians dare not challenge the role of the military budget as the primary organizing principle of our economy, and as long as the militarized and masculinized ideology of American exceptionalism remains the almost unitary language with which we speak of national security and foreign policy, there should be no surprise when ostensible doves from the Democratic Party such as Barack Obama pursue large-scale military campaigns in places like Afghanistan, and seem to do so as readily as their reputedly hawkish counterparts in the Republican Party. Alternate strategies to large-scale military violence require new story-lines of national identity and national security. We need to give ourselves a choice about whether taking up the knife is what the situation calls for. We need to ask questions about how we got into such a situation in the first place. We need to create alternatives to the logic that defines security as killing or being killed. Clearly, rhetoric plays a significant role in preparing these choices. But, as Obama's performance indicates, it is unlikely that our presidents and our politicians will do the rhetorical work necessary to disorient the prevailing exceptionalist narrative and reorient the debate towards the ethos of human security. It falls to us – citizens, activists and intellectuals – to turn our political rhetoric away from antagonisms that require violence towards the democratic task of contending with opponents with whom we share the world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For good overviews of the myth of American exceptionalism and its role in American foreign policy see Donald Pease, *The New American*

*Exceptionalism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009; and Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (Yale University Press, 2009). William Spanos, *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization: The Specter of Vietnam* (State University of New York Press, 2008) offers a more conceptual approach to the concept, and investigates its narrative structure.

<sup>2</sup> They were: an executive order to close the prison at Guantnamo Bay, an executive order prohibiting the use of torture and revoking any former [...] executive directives, orders and regulations inconsistent with this order [...] (Obama, *Lawful*), and an executive order establishing a Special Interagency Task Force on Detainee Disposition whose purpose was to review the legality of treatment of prisoners of war and its consistency with the interests of justice and our foreign policy (Obama, *Detention*).

<sup>3</sup> Many critics of Bush's national security policies frame their criticism in terms of his almost messianic version of the American story, while at the same time ignoring the unmistakable gender symbolism that undergirds it. So, for example, Bush is criticized for his winner-take-all approach to conflict, for his apocalyptic narrative of the war on terror as a war between good and evil, for his doctrine of preemptive war, for his assertion of the identity between patriotism and citizen obedience, for his abuse of executive power, for his unilateralism, and so forth. Several examples of these kind of critique are Benjamin R. Barber, *Fears Empire* (W.W. Norton, 2003); Colleen Elizabeth Kelley, *Post-9/11 American Presidential Rhetoric* (Lexington Books, 2007); Robert Ivie, *Democracy and America's War on Terror* (University of Alabama Press, 2005); Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire* (Metropolitan Books, 2004); John Newhouse, *Imperial America* (Vintage, 2003). Several examples of critiques of Bush's national security policies and rhetoric that specifically thematize questions of gender and masculinity are: Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream* (Picador, 2007); Andrew Feffer, *W's Masculine Pseudo-Democracy in W Stands for Women* (Duke University Press, 2007); Mary Hawkesworth, *Feminists vs. Feminization: Confronting the War Logics of the Bush Administration in W Stands for Women* (Duke University Press, 2007); Bonnie Mann, *Manhood, Sexuality, and Nation in Post-9/11 United States in Security Disarmed* (Rutgers University Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> This praise of Obama's ability to resignify national mythologies for a potentially democratizing change of direction in American politics is shared by other scholars. For example, John M. Murphy contrasts Obama's analysis of the emerging economic crisis in 2008 with that of his principal opponents, Hillary Clinton and John McCain. He argues that Obama frames the crisis in terms that call for democratic decision-making based on a version of the American story replete with agency (318) in contrast to the understandings of the crisis proffered by Clinton and McCain that represent the capitalist market almost in natural terms as a force over which we have little control. Similarly, Rowland and Jones convincingly argue that Obama's electrifying speech at the 2004 Democratic Convention stood out because it successfully resignified the myth of the American Dream as something more properly belonging to the communitarian ethos of the Democratic Party rather than the

individualistic ethos of the Republican Party, and that this recasting of the American dream had the potential for a fundamental recasting of American politics.(443)

<sup>5</sup> Although outside the scope of this essay let me note briefly that Obama was very lucky to be matched against a female candidate who, as front-runner for almost all of 2007, emphasized her experience and political know-how more than her status as a candidate of change. In the specific arena of national security and war in the Middle East, Clinton put a great deal of stress on her military muscularity as the one candidate who knew how to protect the nation from day one. In this context, Obama was able to position himself as the candidate of change, while also successfully performing a much softer masculinity on national security issues without at the same time becoming emasculated in the eyes of Democratic Party voters (despite Clintons aggressive efforts to do precisely this as she began to lose the primaries). I argue (in a paper in progress) that this special circumstance allowed Obama to imply that he held a less militaristic view of national security than Clinton, but that evidence from the primary debates and, even more definitively, from the general election campaign shows otherwise.

<sup>6</sup> For excellent critiques of our prosecution of war in the context of Afghan culture, politics and history see Scott Altran, *To Beat Al Qaeda, Look to the East* in *New York Times Opinion Page* (December 13, 2009) and William R. Polk, "An Open Letter to President Obama" *The Nation*, 19 October 2009: 11-14.

<sup>7</sup> In *Democracy and Americas War on Terror*, Robert Ivie writes eloquently of the logic of fear that underscores the American practice of democracy. He calls this demophobia. Rather than a strong democracy in which citizens actively engage in articulating their interests, and creating national community, he argues that we practice a thin democracy in which the citizen is an object of fear that must be contained if we are not to descend into chaos and insecurity. The perceived fragility of democracy in the international scene which so often requires U.S. military intervention is mirrored here in the perceived fragility of democracy at home. In this context, to ask questions, demand information, require proof, or in any way to impede or oppose the wisdom and the will of the president/father becomes unpatriotic.

<sup>8</sup> For a report on civilian deaths in current conflict in Afghanistan see the United Nations report of civilian casualties in Afghanistan (UN News Centre 2009).

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