Tough Enough? Beyond the dominion of conventional masculinity in the politics of national security -- presentation by Charles Knight to the Women in Public Policy weekly seminar, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA USA, 18 October 2005 - as delivered

Author's Note: This is a work in progress. Please do not quote without prior permission from the author. This is a new area of work and discovery for me and I very much invite friendly guidance and criticism. Please contact me at: cknight(at)comw.org or 617-547-4474. I am co-director of the Project on Defense Alternatives at the Commonwealth Institute, Cambridge, MA USA. http://www.comw.org/pda/

Before I attempt to describe for you my recent adventures in gender space, I want to tell you a little about who I am in the world of national security policy. Most of my time is spent on what I would call policy assessment with an occasional chance to develop ideas for policy alternatives – hence the name of my organization – the Project on Defense Alternatives.

In the last four years most of my work has been connected to the war in Iraq and I am proud to credit the Project on Defense Alternatives with several important and very substantive critiques of that war. In detail, this work includes such activities as reconciling inconsistent government accounts of the distribution of U.S. troops deployed to hundreds of countries around the globe – this detail in service of assessing the stress of the Iraq occupation on the U.S. Army in order, in turn, to develop something meaningful to say about the sustainability of the Bush-era policies of invasion and occupation of medium-size countries.

Almost never does gender analysis come into this work. Most of what I do stays comfortably within the familiar rational discourse paradigm.

Nonetheless, I have long been troubled by what passes as rational discourse in the mainstream of national security debates.   This was never more so than during the 2004 presidential campaign when it became clear to me that a discourse of *'toughness'* was dominating what was at best a meager national security debate. It was then that I decided I turn much more of my professional attention to gender politics.

The toughness discourse is part of what Carol Cohn has called a "gendered system of meanings" that underlie the politics of national security. This is also a coded discourse that signals affinity with militaristic and generally conservative policy options. When effective it serves to block the advance of progressive military and foreign policies that are characteristically less reliant on military means.

Interestingly, it is not primarily conservative Republicans who work the 'toughness discourse,' but rather it is the Democrats who use it most frequently. I'll mention a few recent examples:

Al From and Bruce Reed, leaders of the centrist Democratic Leadership Council, wrote in the May issue of the DLC magazine *Blueprint* about overcoming voters' doubts about the Democratic Party's **toughness and resolve** on national security issues and about the need to "recapture the **muscular**, progressive internationalism of Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy."

Simon Rosenberg, president of the center-left Democratic organization called the New Democratic Network wrote in September of last year: "Democrats must erode Republican's advantage on leadership [and] **match their toughness** on security…"[1]

When a politician takes a posture of conventional masculinized toughness and thereby avoids distinguishing desirable toughness from that which is undesirable, the posture (secured as it is in a gendered system of meanings) serves to avoid and deflect substantive debate about security policy. It is a default that has rarely failed politicians.

In a 2002 speech to the Democratic Leadership Council President Clinton said,

> **Strong and wrong** beats **weak and right**.

There is no reason to think that Bill Clinton was referring to policies that are weak in substance, but rather as a politician he refers to the *appearance of weakness*, or more precisely, policies that are vulnerable by current political calculus to the characterization of weakness by the political opposition.

To summarize: the 'politics of toughness' is **all about the avoidance of an appearance of weakness** and that appearance is situated in a cultural context with powerful gender dimensions.

In regards to how this played out in the last national election I found this brief comment in the *New York Review of Books* that summed it up quite nicely.

Professor Paul Cohen of Lawrence University writes:

> **The Republican storyline reached Americans at the gut level because it was fundamentally about masculinity -- about who is and who is not a 'real man.' Bush played the tough, aggressive 'stand-up guy' who would stay the course… Kerry was transformed into a soft, flip-flopping, effete elitist -- a 'girly**

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[1] Email broadcast from the New Democratic Network, 15 September 2004.

> **man.' In the Republican narrative 'Democrat' translated as**
> **'weak' and 'liberal' as 'effeminate.'**

As Paul Cohen's comment tells us, the toughness discourse is closely connected to this notion of a 'real man.' While conventional womanhood status is achieved for the most part through biological processes, conventional manhood status is granted by other males after ritualized ordeals and other social tests that often involve symbolic or actual violence. That other men are the keepers of manhood status has important consequences for gender politics.   Men live with their manhood under the constant threat of revocation, and this contingency is a powerful enforcer of conventional power relations among males.

To illustrate how contingent *manhood* fits into the discourse about security and how it shores up a hegemonic masculinity I want to use the words of an archetypical man of action who in a moment of enthusiasm told us something interesting about how he experienced the fighting in Afghanistan.

On February 4th of this year the AP quotes Marine Corps Lt. Gen James Mattis as saying:

> **Actually, it's a lot of fun to fight. You know, it's a hell of hoot…**
> **It's fun to shoot some people. I like brawling.**
>
> **You go into Afghanistan, you got guys who slap women**
> **around for five years because they didn't wear a veil. You**
> **know, guys like that ain't got no manhood left anyway. So it's**
> **a hell of a lot of fun to shoot them.**

What caught my attention in this was that Mattis is justifying his pleasure in lethal violence within a cultural notion of "manhood" and, in particular, the issue **of who has it and who doesn't**.   Mattis derides the manhood of his enemy counterparts and once Mattis can judge them as less than real men he finds full permission to enjoy killing them.

Feminists have pointed out that in the stories of war the victor is usually gendered male and often the vanquished is gendered (**or re-gendered**) female. [Goldstein p. 371] In the binary system of conventional masculinity and femininity, if you have your manhood taken away what are you other than a woman, **or in the masculinist discourse, a sissy or a girly-man**? Furthermore, while a woman is tolerated in her place, in this system of thought **there is no place for 'out of their place' males who are named and rejected as sissies, girly-men, fags, or queers**.

From an international relations perspective the personal motivations of an individual soldier such as Mattis are well below the radar: state interests and

associated motives are thought of as quite different from those of individuals in the state system. Furthermore there is no evidence I know of that most soldiers are motivated to fight by ideas such as Mattis' or that the military is a haven for men who share those ideas. Instead, for the my purposes in this talk, Mattis's story provides a way for me to introduce a key political premise:

For every person like Mattis in the military there are undoubtedly ten, twenty or a hundred in civilian life. And in the American system of governance wars are pursued by ad hoc war coalitions that need to mobilize diverse groupings of political actors. **People who are inclined to fight over matters of manhood offer a significant and reliable part of war coalitions and this group tracks closely to conventional masculine identity.**

Now I want to return your attention to Mattis' seemingly gratuitous remark that he likes brawling! Brawling is fighting, usually fist fighting, for sport. People who do it tend to think of it as a worthy activity, and even if bloodied in the process, it is experienced first and foremost as **fun**. Participants who are usually male pride themselves with being ready for a fight at the slightest provocation. I believe Mattis made this remark about brawling because our culture includes the notion that *real men* are brawlers, and his affinity for brawling shores up his identity as a "real man."

However, brawling is not something **that I** have ever, ever wanted to do or thought might be fun. And when I have witnessed it I have made a point to give it a wide berth. Mattis' statement signaled that his masculinity is very different from mine.

I believe **there is some more than trivial portion of males in our society who feel something like me and who exclude from their masculine identity affinity for brawling and, indeed, most any violence against males or females.** I propose to you that this portion of males, when organized into self-confident identity and in alignment with other gender identity groupings, represents a potentially significant political expression in regards to national security policy. Right now organization of these males is inhibited, but with attention to this potential, this situation could change in the next decades.

However, under current conditions of hegemony the leading males who have laid claim to the title of "real men" are able to make political use of the **binary opposition of "real man" and "not a man" which is internalized in nearly all males. They use this to suppress opposing political expression of other males who are inclined toward different security policy preferences and thereby to rather too easily pull them into a hegemonic consensus.**

If other masculinities are to challenge the hegemony of the conventional, we must resist the temptation to contest the character of a 'real man' -- to redefine this type – to say "We are real men of a different sort…"

The best strategy, I believe, is to cede to conservatives this particular ground, **the lonely mountain top held by real men**. Instead **we need to develop multiple strong points** for males in a diverse gender space of politics. I will stress the word **develop** since I believe there are as yet few alternative strong points in gender space for males to occupy. **Gay man is one such point** that has some strength, culturally and politically. But we need several others.

When I refer to gender space I am thinking about all of that space between and around what has traditionally been placed into a duality of masculine and feminine. I believe there is a multidimensional space of gender possibilities that don't lie in a straight line between man and woman. Gay, lesbian and transgender (and more recently queer) culture and politics has brought awareness of this gender space, especially among younger Americans who are increasingly open and accepting of a wide range of gender expressions simply unimaginable a couple decades ago.

Although GLBT and Q cultures are leading the way in this discovery, **it is not my contention that they as an allied set of social movements** will gain sufficient power to transform the politics of national security in the foreseeable future. Rather, **my hypothesis is that there is some meaningful portion of males, many of whom are sexually straight and don't currently identify with queer culture, who have masculinities distinct from the traditional 'real man' type**. This set might be composed of two or three different masculine types. Right now we simply don't know much about this male gender space and as part of a research agenda we need to learn more about these males and the gender space they occupy.

To provide an illustration of the potential for developing a new national security discourse from out of a more varied male gender space, I will return to the toughness discourse. **With a varied male gender complex joining with an already varied female gender complex we liberate the possibility of a discourse that makes distinctions between those qualities within the notion of "toughness" that may be useful to our communities and to our nation and those qualities that are not useful and often harmful.**

In an initial step in this direction I have identified a number of words and phrases that are frequently used in the "toughness discourse." These are:

strong, muscular
decisive action
resolve, resolute
enduring, resilient
severe, hard, hard-headed
vigorous, vital
robust, determined

uncompromising
unsentimental
realistic

Some of these words speak to qualities that we want in leaders and some to qualities we could do without and can be harmful. I have made a first pass at sorting them.

In the category of those qualities that most of us might want in a leader I put:

strong, decisive, active, resolute, enduring, resilient, robust, and determined.

These seem like generally useful traits, especially for a leader with whom we entrust the security of our persons and families.

In the category of problematic and complicated qualities associated with 'toughness' I put:

severe, hard, muscular, uncompromising, unsentimental, and realistic.

All of these are complicated in the sense that sometimes they can be good qualities and sometimes they are bad and at least insufficient.

Each of these words or word sets can be further unpacked to reveal opportunities for identifying what we want from leaders and the policy-making process. Take the duality of "hard-headed and soft-headed" which are associated with the masculine type of unsentimental and realistic, on the one hand, and the feminine type of sentimental and irrational, on the other.   Choosing to allow some sentiment into our thinking about things is quite different than unconsciously allowing sentiment to hold sway. And, conversely, choosing to attempt a realistic assessment of facts is quite different than unconsciously allowing rigid, close-minded thought processes to dominate.

This gives you a sense of the possibilities currently submerged in just one word, "tough," …common in the discourse of security and held reified there by the hegemony of conventional masculinity.

To restate my political hypothesis:

In this set of other masculinities, that already exists yet is currently subordinate, there is considerable political latency which could be organized into eventual alliance with progressive women to advance security policies that are less reliant on violence. Effective political organization will require establishing strong points of identity and confidence for these males.

The power of this set of other masculinities will remain latent as long as these males are kept within the confines of conventional masculinity by a combination of shaming and physical intimidation and the reified idea that there is only one gender choice for males – "real man" or "not a man." It is routine for boys growing up to be teased, harassed, and beaten if they stray ever so little from conventional male looks or behavior. This is something I can vividly remember from my childhood.

At the extreme, many of the most vicious hate crimes are against gays, transsexuals, and people of ambiguous gender appearance and behavior.

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Returning to the potential political expression of males **who are not fixed in the conventional masculine posture**, the requisites for realizing their potential political power when aligned with women are these:

1. describing and "raising consciousness" about these different masculinities so that males can recognize them in themselves and have the option of identifying with one or another of their aspects or types.
2. an impassioned struggle, along the lines that gays have mounted in the last thirty years, against the shaming and physical intimidation of boys and men; and
3. following the examples of gays and lesbians, creating a proud and assertive political and social expression for these male gender variants.

I don't want to speculate on how long it will take for these new masculinities to emerge as a contending political force, but I am willing to hazard a prediction that a generation from now gender expression in politics including national security politics will be very different than it is now.

Finally, I want to share with you a fantastic scene of the gender complex in a national security council meeting thirty-five years from now.

Imagine with me a significant generic challenge by a foreign country to the interests of the United States. A National Security Council meeting is called and at the opening of the meeting the President asks those assembled to each give their reaction to the situation. Here is what transpires:

Sam speaks first: "We must respond with clear purpose." Is Sam tough enough?

Carol follows with: "Once begun, our aim and action must be true and resolute." Is Carol tough enough?

Pat then adds: "What we do will be of great consequence – we must think through our plans with care and apply all the wisdom we can muster." Is Pat tough enough?

Dana interjects: "I think we must kick some butt!" Is Dana tough enough?

Andy then says: "And we must discipline ourselves to be realistic about what our actions can and cannot accomplish. Actions with symbolic purpose are too often poor choices." Is Andy tough enough?

Geri says: "I am prepared to work through the night to get this right." Is Geri tough enough?

Chris is next: "Whatever we decide to do we must call on all that is robust and resolute in our society to raise a vigorous defense of our people." Is Chris tough enough?

Francis speaks next: "In the end our security interests are best served by acting with full respect for others." Is Francis tough enough?

Eight people. Eight gender aspects offered in response to a tough challenge.

Two genders expressing eight aspects?

Three or four genders expressing eight aspects?

Eight different genders, eight aspects?

What are the possibilities?