

Conference

Gender, War and Culture: From Colonial Conquest, Standing Armies and Revolutionary Wars to the Wars of Nations and Empires (1650s-1910s)

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Part 2: Chapter 13

GENDER AND THE WARS OF NATION-BUILDING AND-KEEPING IN THE AMERICAS, 1830S- 1870S

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The middle decades of the nineteenth century in the Americas were marked by dramatic warfare in the name of nationalism. From the 1830s through the 1870s there was almost always a war occurring somewhere in the Western Hemisphere, but the most important conflicts had two things in common: the outcome had important determining effects on the national sovereignty or dominion of at least one of the nations involved, and both participants and observers interpreted the causes, progress, and outcomes of these encounters as crucial to manhood, womanhood, and gender relations.

Nor were these assumptions entirely fanciful. War, and a martial vision of masculinity that grounded a man's worth in his ability to dominate others, were often (but not always) mutually reinforcing: military encounters upheld violence as positive attribute in men, while violent men promoted war as a means to an end. During ongoing conflicts, nationalism was grounded in sacrifice, and citizenship was intimately linked to military service. During protracted conflicts that link was rarely questioned, but in the aftermath of many of the most devastating conflicts, like the American Civil War, and independence movements in Latin America, martial manhood was pathologized as unproductive, and devalued in favor of more restrained practices of manhood that looked to work and family as the measurement of a man's worth.

Nor did warfare impact masculinity alone. Practices of womanhood were also shaped by the demands of war, leading in many cases to increased female autonomy and authority during wartime. This autonomy rarely lasted long. Even women who actively served in the military did not benefit from the larger equation that citizenship was grounded in military sacrifice. They might gain financial benefit, but never citizenship from their sacrifice. What was more likely was that some privileged women of these new nations, or newly sanctified nations, gained new levels of authority within the homes and society at large, as "Republican Mothers." At the same time their subservience was ensured by a

widespread division between public and private that granted authority and the right to privacy to male heads of households within their domains.

In virtually all wars of nation building and maintaining in the Americas, the individual virtue of both men and women was understood to have national importance. Virtue for women was almost always equated with chastity, and most post-war nations saw an increase in social policing of female sexuality. In the aftermath of war male virtue was largely understood to consist of working hard, and providing for and protecting their dependents (including wives). This virtue was understood to be the bedrock of citizenship. As a result, while elite women emerged from wars with new levels of social respect, poor women, or women unable or unwilling to conform to moral standards found their actions newly scrutinized, condemned, and often criminalized. This essay will follow a roughly chronological and special organization, starting with the aftermath of Latin American independence movements in the 1830s, through the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846, filibustering in the 1850s, and finally the US Civil War.

Family, Household, and State in the Newly Independent Nations of South and Central America

Many Latin American nations spent the 1830s wrestling with the fallout from protracted wars of liberation against Spain. In keeping with the pattern of liberal revolutions in the Atlantic World, Latin American wars of independence reinforced upper-class male authority by linking citizenship rights to military participation. This was true in cases, such as Gran Columbia, where there was not a high rate of female participation in those wars, as well as in Mexico, where high levels of female support for independence, and direct military engagement, won women temporary respect and acclaim without changing their job opportunities or other material conditions. In all cases the men who emerged as leaders in their new nations grounded their authority in large part over their control of their households.¹

Newly independent Venezuela in the 1830s was marked by a lengthy struggle for power between two groups of men with distinctly different gendered practices and ideals. The first were military leaders who insisted that Venezuela should be led by those who “derramaron su sangre” (spilled their blood) in the creation of the nation. The second were oligarchs who embraced liberalism and claimed their rights to power based on their extensive landownership and education. The oligarchs linked the military with a continuation of the costly and deadly independence movement of the last two decades, and condemned the military as “barbarous” aristocratic parasites, unworthy to lead a nation into modernization.² These two models of manhood were at war, if you will, with one another, from 1830 through the 1860s. By 1870s bourgeois masculine values (of hard work, sobriety, and education) had won out over military ideas of honor for a large segment of the population.³

Both masculine ideologies shared a conviction that the household was a sacred space controlled by a male patriarch, within which the law had little right to invade. At the same time in newly national Venezuela, motherhood gained traction as a social function of value to the state, gaining some accused women legal pardon and leniency during a period when criminals of both sexes were being tried and punished with increasing frequency. “Virtuous”

women were entitled to an extra degree of respect, and credit, not only because the home was a sacred space where a husband's power was to be respected, but also because these women would bring up the next generation of citizens. So war, as well as the desire to distance independent Venezuela from the legacy of Spanish cruelty, offered some accused female Venezuelans extra protection under the law, and new value as well to the ideal of domesticity.

Arequpa, Peru was a representative provincial Latin American city in a region without major racial conflict. The discourse of republican honor that governed Peru in the 1830s was explicitly masculine, "because republican authorities needed men as workers, soldiers, and political partisans, they were willing to reinforce patriarchal privileges in the private sphere in exchange for more respectable male conduct in public." Women's speech was marginalized because republican political theory defined public opinion as the result of "rational" debate among male citizens, as opposed to the female gossip prevalent in the crowded neighborhoods and small towns of colonial Latin America.⁴

In Peru, men made claims to citizenship based on their military service, but a shortage of agricultural labor during wartime led authorities to praise hard work as a crucial contribution to the state. So in Peru, a work ethic became a key component to of respectability. Plebians who rejected other aspects of bourgeois morality, like temperance, took pride in their status as productive citizens. Honor for women continued to be grounded in chastity, but it also gave rise to a philosophy of "republican womanhood" in which women were embraced for nurturing republican virtue in their families. As one pupil at a female seminar in Peru in 1833 put it, "The fair sex . . . will be the compass that guides the domestic ship along the path of honor".⁵

Women were active participants in these wars, in a wide variety of ways. But there were two primary ways that women's military service was understood: as heroic soldiers, and as camp followers. Some Latin American women were able to win the respect of men with battlefield heroics: by seemingly rejecting their femininity, and embracing a masculine role, they were able to temporarily subvert the gender order.⁶ This was not the case in the United States, as I will discuss later, nor, for everywhere in Latin America. Indeed military service usually dishonored women in Peru, since the assumption was that their morals would be corrupted by exposure to war and to soldiers. With very few exceptions, military women were equated with the camp followers, those women who accompanied the armies, often at great danger to themselves, and performed the traditional services expected from women, including cooking, cleaning, and sex.

Nowhere in Latin America did military activity lead to citizenship for women, or even the call for citizenship. In 1839 Peru financially compensated a female spy for her activities during the civil war of the 1830s, but neither she nor anyone else identified her as a citizen or republican because of her actions. Women in Peru never called for political inclusion in the new state. Rather they manipulated the language of domesticity so that elite women could demand a right to education and recognition of their social value as mothers and arbiters of morality. Unlike in Venezuela, however, claims of motherhood did not lead to clemency from criminal behavior. As elsewhere, poor women saw an increased level of policing of their morality after wars than before, along with a general rise in criminal

prosecution. The experience of Antioquia, Columbia, was not dramatically different from that of Peru. Citizenship here was also grounded in the protection of the “traditional” family, and women who were not sexually virtuous were arrested as vagrants.

A somewhat different gender regime emerged in Chihuahua, in the North of Mexico. In a region subjected to repeated raids by Apache warriors over a period of decades, it is not surprising that the residents embraced a standard of masculine honor grounded in military struggle against the Apache. Manhood, properly understood, was highly martial. It encompassed productive labor, but highlighted the defense of virtuous “white” (non-Apache) women against the “barbaric” marauders.⁷

Manhood and the Citizen Soldier during the US-Mexican War

The 1846 war between the United States and Mexico, which ended in 1848 with Mexico transferring half of its territory to its northern neighbor, reveals a number of similarities between the perceived relationship between gender and war in Mexico and the US. In both countries, much of the hard fighting was done by conscripts who failed to conform to masculine ideals of responsibility and citizenship. Enlisted men in the regular army in the United States were viewed with contempt by a nation that venerated independence and held a deep suspicion of standing armies. Soldiers were also subject to harsh physical punishment. As a result, army enlistment was employment of last resort in the United States.⁸

Mexicans hardly thought better of their army conscripts. As in elsewhere in the Americas, to have honor, to be an *hombre de bien*, was viewed as essentially incompatible with service in the regular army. As Peter Beattie has noted about the nineteenth-century Brazilian army, “In some ways, the barracks were a male equivalent of the bordello; both attempted to distance ‘dangerous’ male and female ‘loners’ from ‘honorable’ family households.”⁹ The state directives in Mexico for assembling an army offered heavily gendered critiques of the masculinity of the future soldiers. Along with “loafers” and “criminals,” men forced into the army were to be drawn from the population of “those that frequent taverns or bordellos, loafers, professional gamblers, men living with women they are not married to, married men who mistreat their wives, men who do not fulfill family obligations, incorrigible sons.” Married men, and particularly fathers with children, were to be exempted. Conscription was itself a means to enforce gender norms.¹⁰

Both countries ignored the contributions of the regular or conscripted soldiers while publically celebrating the manhood of the more elite units (volunteers in the United States, and National Guard units in Mexico) that did relatively little of hard fighting. These men refused to be subjected to corporal punishment. They were embraced as model citizen-soldiers who sacrificed for the good of the nation. Indeed, volunteering to fight in Mexico was grounds for a future political career in the United States, a nation that while fearing a standing army has also drawn the bulk of its political leaders from the ranks of citizen soldiers since the time of George Washington.¹¹

Tens of thousands of American men volunteered for war, intent on demonstrating masculine bravery in hand to hand combat. Mexicans were fighting to protect their homes and families. But American volunteers, inspired to a large degree by racism, looked south

for opportunities to prove their manhood. They envisioned Mexico as a land of cowardly men, and beautiful, easily seduced women. Yet war proved profoundly disappointing to most of these volunteers. Opportunities for organized combat were rare, and women less welcoming of their advances than they hoped. Men were far more likely to die from disease in unsanitary camps than in battle. And with the exception of the highly celebrated Battle of Buena Vista (February 1847), there was little hand to hand combat. Instead battles were tests of artillery, and US military dominance from start to finish was in large part attributable to vastly superior American artillery. Volunteers engaged in depredations against civilians, including rape and murder, which shocked their commanding officers. Ironically, enlisted soldiers, although demeaned as unmanly, were far less likely to turn on the innocent than the unregulated volunteers. When word of these atrocities made it back to the United States, citizens worried that the virtue of their young men was being destroyed by service in Mexico, that they would become unfit to return to proper society. This gender critique became a key component of the anti-war movement.¹²

While few American women participated in the war in Mexico, they gained a new degree of political authority at home as war protesters. Mexican women, by contrast, played a major role supporting the armies, caring for the sick and wounded, and in a number of cases, actively fighting. The figure of the female soldier took on outsized importance to both Mexicans and Americans. For Mexico, the heroic female soldier represented the extent of the nation's rejection of invasion, while figures like the "Maid of Monterrey," serving water to injured soldiers of all uniforms on the battlefield, helped humanize the invasion of a neighboring republic for US soldiers. Cross-dressing female Mexican soldiers, who fall in love with American volunteers, were a common narrative device in cheap US dime novels published during the war. These international romances, which almost always resulted in marriages, helped convince American readers that the annexation of Mexican territory was natural and as welcome to seemingly effeminate Mexican nation as to the manly United States. These tropes would be repeated in the 1850s, as American filibusters, or private armies, invaded Latin America and the Caribbean intent on annexing new lands to the United States. Visions of martial manhood, and willing women, drove men not only to invade countries with which the United States was at peace, but also led many more back home to support their illegal actions as the proper use of power by a "potent" young nation like the United States.¹³

Beyond the Home and Into the Nation: Women and Men in the US Civil War

The mid-nineteenth century's deadliest war of nationalism was the United States Civil War, 1861-1866 which resulted in the deaths of between 660,000 and 850,000 Americans. When the Southern states seceded in 1861, they did so out of profoundly conservative motives. The citizens of the South hoped to keep their "traditional" way of life in tact, complete with slavery, plantation agriculture, and patriarchal households where men of all classes held greater levels of authority over wives and children than in Northern states. Indeed one reason why non-slave holding whites supported secession just as vigorously as did slaveholders was because they understood their own households as analogous to plantations, realms where their authority was absolute. As in the U.S.-Mexican War, men on both sides of the divide entered the conflict intent on winning honor through hand-to-hand conflict, and as in the U.S.-Mexican War, the reality of warfare with heavy artillery

made a mockery of those dreams. Most soldiers found conflict profoundly alienating, and a new ideal of courage emerged, one grounded in the ability to survive rather than the nerve to face a combatant without flinching.¹⁴

The U.S. Civil War had a profound impact on both conceptions of gender and the material conditions of women. A few famous women in both the North and South served as spies and dressed as men in order to fight on the front. But many more were forced to reconsider their own expectations about women's work and proper female behavior. Although there were few battles north of the Mason-Dixon Line, Northern women found new economic opportunities as nurses and teachers when men left for the front, jobs they as a sex retained as "women's work" after war's end. For Southern women the experience was far more dramatic. Confederate mobilization forged for white Southern women "a radically changed and far more direct relationship to the state."¹⁵

At the start of the war, both Southern men and women shared a belief that women should be kept insulated from the war. Yet, with war all around them, that was clearly impossible. While rape of white women was limited, black women were frequent rape victims. With men away, white women took on virtually all of the jobs previously reserved for men, overturning the very conservative ideology that led to war in the first place. Women also became politically active. Not only were elite women the key creators of the ideology of confederate nationalism, ordinary white women were increasingly likely to contact government officials as the war went on, demanding their assistance in coping with the absence of their male relatives and the material hardships of war. Women were also an integral part of the war of occupation. Women in occupied areas were not simply preoccupied (rendered inert) but occupied; active, responsive, and the critical bottom rail in the war of occupation within the larger Civil War. In New Orleans women continued to protest the occupation of New Orleans after General Benjamin Butler famously attempted to stifle dissent by comparing protesting women to prostitutes. Yet in most cases Southern women did not long for, or even welcome this expanded sphere of influence. As Stephanie McCurry writes, "it was not so much that white women emerged incisively out of the recesses of the household into public life during the war as that the state came barging in their front door, catapulting them into a relationship they had never sought but could hardly refuse."¹⁶

Among the many adjustments both sides needed to make after the US Civil War were ones of gender. As husbands and wives renegotiated their post-war expectations and responsibilities for one another, so too did women renegotiate their relationships to the state. The Federal Government was the nation's largest employer of women during the war. After the war women suggested that since they had "lent their support to the government ... did it not then mean that the government must be accountable to its women?" (p. 133) The fact that women petitioned the state for pensions for their husbands and families reveals that in the North as in the South, war led women into the public sphere.¹⁷

The key issue of sectional reconciliation had a gendered component as well. Northern resentment against the active role that Southern women played during secession and war was only diffused in 1867, when the US passed a Southern Famine Relief Bill that reintroduced a "new paternalism" to the South and helped renormalize Southern gender

relations. With the passage of this bill, Judith Giesberg has argued, the process of forgetting the extent to which women were active participants in the war could begin.¹⁸

Yet unlike in the earlier wars of nationalism in Latin America, the experiences of war were difficult for society to forget, and the US Civil War brought long-term change to gender norms and gender relations in the United States. Confederate efforts to maintain patriarchy were only relatively more successful than their efforts to maintain slavery. Women in both the North and South emerged from this lengthy conflict with new skills and new occupations. The South's reigning ideology of martial manhood was not banished, violent oppression became a fact of life for the South's African-American freedmen, who were increasingly subject to reigns of terror. But with the victory of North over South, Northern ideals of manhood, newly restrained and grounded in success in business and family, became the reigning ideology of the United States as well. Yet not even this radical and transformative Civil War led to calls for female enfranchisement and citizenship. Women emerged from the American Civil War with more opportunities than Latin American women had from their own wars, but throughout the Americas, citizenship remained the prerogative of men.

¹ Evelyn Cherpak, "The Participation of Women in the Independence Movement in Gran Columbia, 1780-1830," in *Latin American Women: Historical Perspectives*, Asunción Lavrin, ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978): 219-234.

² Arlene Díaz, *Female Citizens, Patriarchs, and the Law in Caracas, Venezuela*. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 120.

³ Díaz, 174

⁴ Sarah Chambers, *Subjects to Citizens: Honor, Gender, and Politics in Arequipa, Peru*. University Park, PA, 1999), 5.

⁵ Chambers, 201-202, quote page 202.

⁶ Cherpak, "The Participation of Women in the Independence Movement in Gran Columbia, 1780-1830,"

⁷ Ana María Alonso, *Thread of Blood: Colonialism, Revolution, and Gender on Mexico's Northern Frontier*. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995).

⁸ Edward M. Coffman, *The Old Army: A Portrait of the American Army in Peacetime, 1784-1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Paul Foos, *A Short, Offhand Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict during the Mexican-American War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

⁹ Peter Beattie, *The Tribute of Blood: Army, Honor, Race and Nation in Brazil, 1864-1945*, (Durham, 2001), 9.

¹⁰ José Antonio Serrano Ortega, *El contingente de sangre: Los gobiernos estatales y departamentales y los métodos de reclutamiento del ejército permanente mexicano, 1824-1844*, (Mexico City, 1993), 79-80; Peter Guardino, "Gender, Soldiering, and Citizenship in the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848," *American Historical Review*, forthcoming.

¹¹ Amy S. Greenberg, *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico*, (New York: Knopf, 2012); Quote: José Antonio Serrano Ortega, *El contingente de sangre: Los gobiernos estatales y departamentales y los métodos de reclutamiento del ejército permanente mexicano, 1824-1844*, (Mexico City, 1993), 79-80

¹² Greenberg, *A Wicked War*.

¹³ Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*. (Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Streeby, Shelley. *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Gerald Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War*. (New York, 1987)

¹⁵ Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 88.

¹⁶ McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 156.

¹⁷ Nina Silber, *Daughters of the Union: Northern Women Fight the Civil War*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 133.

¹⁸ Judith Giesberg, "Epilogue" in Whites, LeeAnn and Alecia P. Long, eds. *Occupied Women: Gender, Military Occupation, and the American Civil War*. Baton Rouge, LA, 2008