THE TERROR DREAM

FEAR AND FANTASY IN POST-9/11 AMERICA

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CHAPTER 1

We're at War, Sweetheart

EARLY ON THE MORNING OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, I HAD A NIGHTMARE. I don't know how to explain it—I lay no claim to oracular powers. Maybe it was just a coincidental convergence. I dreamed I was sitting in an aisle seat of a commercial airliner. Next to me was another passenger, a woman. A hand jostled my headrest, and I looked up to see two young men bearing down on us. They both held pistols. One put his gun to my neck and shot. Then he shot again. I watched, as if from outside my body, as the first bullet entered at an angle and lodged in my throat. Moments later, the second bullet grazed by me and disappeared into the neck of my seatmate. I noticed that I was still alive but unable to speak. Then I woke up. A glorious dawn was filtering through the window blinds of my bedroom in Los Angeles. I described the dream to my boyfriend, in hopes of releasing its grip on my mind. I feared falling asleep and returning to that plane. As we lay there talking, the phone rang.

"Are you watching television?" a friend asked.

"No," I said. "Why?"

"Go turn on your television."

What I saw on the screen only deepened my sensation of being caught in some insane realm beyond reality, unable to wake up. It was a feeling that would linger.

My induction into a more willful unreality came later that day, when the phone rang again. A reporter in the Los Angeles bureau of an East Coast newspaper was pursuing a "reaction story." I was perplexed—he had hardly reached an authority on terrorism. As it turns out, that wasn't his concern. After a couple of vague questions about what this tragedy would "mean to our social fabric," he answered his own question with, given the morning's events, a bizarrely gleeful tone: "Well, this sure pushes feminism off the map!" In the ensuing days, I would receive more calls from journalists on the 9/11 "social fabric" beat, bearing more proclamations of gender restructuring—among them a *New York Times* reporter researching an article on "the return of the manly man" and a *New York Observer* writer seeking comment on "the trend" of women "becoming more feminine after 9/11." By which, as she made clear, she meant *less feminist*. Women were going to regret their "independence," she said, and devote themselves to "baking cookies" and finding husbands "to take care of them."

The calls left me baffled. By what mental process had these journalists traveled from the inferno at ground zero to a repudiation of female independence? Why would they respond to terrorist attack by heralding feminism's demise—especially an attack hatched by avowed antagonists of Western women's liberation? That a cataclysmic event might eclipse other concerns would hardly seem to warrant special mention. Unremarkably, celebrity scandals, Hollywood marital crises, and the disappearance of government intern Chandra Levy all slipped from the front pages. But my gloating caller and his cohorts weren't talking about the normal displacement of small stories by the big one. Feminist perspectives, and those of independent women more generally, didn't just naturally fade from view after 9/11.

In the weeks that followed, I had occasion to see this phenomenon repeated in many different ways. Of all the peculiar responses our culture manifested to 9/11, perhaps none was more incongruous than the desire to

rein in a liberated female population. In some murky fashion, women's independence had become implicated in our nation's failure to protect itself. And, conversely, the need to remedy that failure somehow required a distaff correction, a discounting of female opinions, a demeaning of the female voice, and a general shrinkage of the female profile. As it turned out, feminists weren't the only women to be "pushed off the map"; their expulsion was just the preview for the larger erasures to follow.

WITHIN DAYS OF the attack, a number of media venues sounded the death knell of feminism. In light of the national tragedy, the women's movement had proved itself, as we were variously informed, "parochial," "frivolous," and "an unaffordable luxury" that had now "met its Waterloo." The terrorist assault had levied "a blow to feminism," or, as a headline on the op-ed page of the *Houston Chronicle* pithily put it, "No Place for Feminist Victims in Post 9-11 America."[1]

"The feminist movement, already at low ebb, has slid further into irrelevancy," syndicated columnist Cathy Young asserted. "Now that the peaceful life can no longer be guaranteed," military historian Martin van Creveld declared in *Newsday*, "one of the principal losers is likely to be feminism, which is based partly on the false belief that the average woman is as able to defend herself as the average man." In a column titled "Hooray for Men," syndicated columnist Mona Charen anticipated the end of the old reign of feminism: "Perhaps the new climate of danger—danger from evil men—will quiet the anti-male agitation we've endured for so long." *New York Times* columnist John Tierney held out the same hope. "Since Sept. 11, the 'culture of the warrior' doesn't seem quite so bad to Americans worried about the culture of terrorism," he wrote, impugning the supposed feminist "determination to put boys in touch with their inner feelings." "American males' fascination with guns doesn't seem so misplaced now that they're attacking Al Qaeda's fortress," he sniffed. "No one is suggesting a Million Mom March on Tora Bora."[2]

These were, of course, familiar themes, the same old nostrums marching under a bright new banner. Long before the towers fell, conservative efforts to roll back women's rights had been making inroads, and the media

had been issuing periodic pronouncements on "the death of feminism." In part, what the attack on the World Trade Center did was foreground and speed up a process already under way. "Any kind of conflict at a time of unrest in society typically accentuates the fault lines that already exist," Geeta Rao Gupta, president of the International Center for Research on Women, told the *Christian Science Monitor* in a story headlined "Are Women Being Relegated to Old Roles?," one of the few articles to acknowledge what was happening.[3] The seismic jolt of September 11 elevated to new legitimacy the ventings of longtime conservative antifeminists, who were accorded a far greater media presence after the attacks. It also invited closet antifeminists within the mainstream media to come out in force, as a "not now, honey, we're at war" mentality made more palatable the airing of buried resentments toward women's demands for equal status.

What was most striking, and passing strange, was the *way* feminism's detractors framed their assault. In the fall and winter of 2001, the women's movement wasn't just a domestic annoyance; it was a declared domestic enemy, a fifth column in the war on terror. To the old rap sheet of feminist crimes—man hating, dogmatism, humorlessness—was added a new "wartime" indictment: feminism was treason. That charge was made most famously, and most cartoonishly, by Rev. Jerry Falwell. "I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen,'" Falwell thundered on 9/12 on the Christian Broadcast Network, addressing his *j'accuse* to "the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle." By altering traditional gender roles, feminists and their fellow travelers had "caused God to lift the veil of protection which has allowed no one to attack America on our soil since 1812."[4] Falwell's outburst struck even his compatriots as unfortunate, or at least unsubtle. But his allegations, sanitized and stripped of their Old Testament terms, would soon be taken up by conservative pundits and in mainstream outlets; old subpoenas would be reissued, upgraded with new counts of traitorous behavior.

Post-9/11, feminism's defense of legal abortion was accordingly deemed a Benedict Arnold act. "After September 11th the American people are valuing life more and realizing that we need policies to value the dignity and worth of every life," Bush's senior counselor Karen Hughes

said on CNN, on the same day as a massive reproductive-rights march was in progress in the capital. In fact, American opposition to abortion was "really the fundamental difference between us and the terror network we fight," Hughes stressed. (A curious contention, considering that our assailants were hardly prochoice, but her CNN interviewers let it stand.) Others, like Focus on the Family founder James C. Dobson, stated the equation less decorously. "Has God withdrawn his protective hand from the US?" he asked on his organization's Web site—and answered that God is "displeased" with America for "killing 40 million unborn babies." A thirty-second television commercial likening abortion to terrorism was rushed on the air some weeks after the attack by an antiabortion organization—"to take advantage of the 9-11 events to press our case for sparing the lives of babies," as the executive director candidly put it.[5]

The October 15, 2001, edition of the *National Review* could have passed for a special issue on the subject of feminist treachery. In "Their Amerika," John O'Sullivan accused feminists of "taking the side of medieval Islamists against the common American enemy. They feel more comfortable in such superior company than alongside a hard-hat construction worker or a suburban golfer in plaid pants." Another article, "The Conflict at Home," blamed American feminism's "multiculturalist" tendencies for allowing Sharia extremism to thrive in the Arab world. And a third piece claimed that women's rights activists have so browbeaten the American military that our armed services have "simply surrendered to feminist demands" and allowed an insistence on equal opportunity to "trump combat effectiveness."[6]

As the denouncers made their media rounds, they homed in on two aspects of feminist sedition: women's liberation had "feminized" our men and, in so doing, left the nation vulnerable to attack. "Well, you see, there is a very serious problem in this country," Camille Paglia explained to CNN host Paula Zahn a few weeks after 9/11. Thanks to feminism, Paglia said, "men and women are virtually indistinguishable in the workplace." Indeed, especially among the American upper middle class, the man has "become like a woman." (Paglia was weirdly, albeit inadvertently, echoing the words of Taliban attorney general Maulvi Jalilullah Maulvizada, who had earlier told a journalist that when women are given freedom, "men

become like women.") This gender confusion in the workplace would bode ill for our coming conflicts with the Arab world, Paglia warned. "There is a kind of a threat to national security here," she said. "I think that the nation is not going to be able to confront and to defeat other countries where the code of masculinity is more traditional."[7]

The editors and writers in the centrist media expressed such sentiments more euphemistically—as furrow-browed concern that a "soft" America might not be able to rise to the occasion, that a womanly "therapeutic culture" would cause the nation to value the feminine ritual of mourning over martial "action," that a "Band of Brothers" ethic, as one newsmagazine put it, could not take root in a female-centered "*Sex and the City* culture." "For once, let's have no 'grief counselors,'" *Time* editor Lance Morrow lectured. "For once, let's have no fatuous rhetoric about 'healing.'" Coddled Americans had let themselves go and needed to "toughen up." Our World War II elders say we have "become too soft," a story in the *San Francisco Chronicle* warned. Numerous press reports fixated on a report that bin Laden thought Americans were "soft and weak." Beneath the press's incessant fretting lurked anxious questions that all seemed to converge on a single point: would a feminized nation have the will to fight?[8]

The conservative commentariat had an answer and wasn't shy about stating it. The problem, according to the opinion makers from Fox News, the *Weekly Standard*, *National Review*, and the many right-wing-financed think tanks who seemed to be on endless rotation on the political talk shows after 9/11, was simple: the baleful feminist influence had turned us into a "nanny state." In the wake of 9/11, a battle needed to be waged between the forces of besieged masculinity and the nursemaids of overweening womanhood—or, rather, the "vultures" in the "Sisterhood of Grief," as *American Spectator*'s January–February 2002 issue termed them. "When we go soft," Northwestern University psychology professor and American Enterprise scholar David Gutmann warned, "there are still plenty of 'hard' peoples—the Nazis and Japanese in World War II, the radical Islamists now—who will see us as decadent sybarites, and who will exploit, through war, our perceived weaknesses." And why had our spine turned to rubber? The conservative analysis proffered an answer: the femocracy.[9]

"Our culture has undergone a process that one observer has aptly

termed 'debellicization,'" former drug czar William Bennett advised in *Why We Fight*, his 2002 call to arms against the domestic forces that were weakening our "resolve." The "debellicizers" that he identified were, over and over, women—a female army of schoolteachers, psychologists, professors, journalists, authors, and, especially, feminists who taught "that male aggression is a wild and malignant force that needs to be repressed or medicated lest it burst out, as it is always on the verge of doing, in murderous behavior." Since the sixties and seventies, Bennett wrote, this purse-lipped army had denounced American manhood as "a sort of deranged Wild West machismo"; it had derided the Boy Scouts "as irrelevant, 'patriarchal,' and bigoted"; it had infected "generations of American children" with "the principle that violence is always wrong." And with the terrorist attack on our nation, the chicken hawks had come home to roost. "Having been softened up, we might not be able to sustain collective momentum in what we were now being called upon to do," Bennett wrote. "We have been caught with our defenses down."[10]

"What's happening now is not pacifism but passivism," *National Review*'s Mark Steyn maintained soon after the attack in an article titled "Fight Now, Love Later: The Awfulness of an Oprahesque Response." "Passivism" was a pathogen that had invaded the body politic—and American women were its Typhoid Marys, American men its victims. The women who ruled our culture had induced "a terrible inertia filled with feel-good platitudes that absolve us from action," Steyn wrote. He found particularly telling Oprah Winfrey's call, at a post-9/11 prayer service in Yankee Stadium, to "love" one another. "Not right now, Oprah," he instructed. If we were to prevail in the coming war, the nation first needed to unseat this regiment of "grief counselors" and silence all their "drooling about 'healing' and 'closure.'" "You can't begin 'healing' until the guys have stopped firing."[11]

As if feminizing our domestic culture weren't bad enough, the women's movement was also jeopardizing our readiness on the battlefield. "Bands of brothers don't need girls," a *Rocky Mountain News* columnist held, denouncing feminists for depleting the military muscle we would need for the upcoming war on terror. "To them, the military is just another symbol of the male patriarchy that ought to be feminized, anyway, along with the rest of society." Our first lady of antifeminism, Ann Coulter, cast

this argument in her usual vituperous fashion. "This is right where you want to be after Sept. 11—complaining about guns and patriarchy," she addressed feminists in a column titled "Women We'd Like to See . . . in Burkas." "If you didn't already realize how absurd it is to defang men, a surprise attack on U.S. soil is a good reminder. . . . Blather about male patriarchy and phallic guns suddenly sounds as brilliantly prescient as assurances that the Fuhrer would stop at Czechoslovakia."[12]

A few weeks after 9/11, the Independent Women's Forum (an all-female think tank supported by right-wing foundations) inaugurated its onslaught against martial emasculation at the National Press Club. Under the banner "IWF Women Facing War," one female panelist after another rose to face the enemy within. "Our freedoms and way of life depend on a strong national defense," Elaine Donnelly, president of the Center for Military Readiness and soon to be a ubiquitous media presence, told the assembled. "And yet, for far too long, a minority of feminist women have presumed to tell not just the commander-in-chief but the secretary of defense and the heads of all the armed forces what to do to advance the feminist agenda in the institution of the military." An "ungendered" armed services with "mandatory assignments" of women to "close combat units" was "the premiere item on the feminist agenda," Donnelly warned, and that agenda had seriously damaged the U.S. military's "morale, discipline, recruiting, retention, and overall readiness."[13]

The IWF, which had been lobbying for years against efforts to bring more women into the military and the police and fire services, celebrated what it saw as vindication. The group's spokeswomen fanned out on television and radio and in print. "It took an act of monstrous criminality to show us this," IWF member and commentator Charlotte Allen declared. "But sometimes, perhaps most of the time, those are jobs that only a guy can do, and if we lower our standards because some women may feel bad about not living up to them, it is going to cost lives." Kate O'Beirne, a *National Review* editor and regular presence on CNN's *Capital Gang*, accused feminists of ruining the military. "Kumbaya confidence courses have replaced ego-bruising obstacle challenges," she wrote a week and a half after 9/11. "Let's hope that stepstools will be provided for female soldiers in Afghanistan."

In late October 2001, Pentagon brass who shared such sentiments announced they would soon be reversing Clinton-era policies that had sought to expand women's roles in battle zones. "That's all changing," a senior defense official told *U.S. News & World Report*. Frontline "units won't involve women," another said. After women's rights groups protested, the effort was shelved for the time being. But the Bush administration quietly began dismembering the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, a long-standing internal institution that had promoted women's progress in the military for more than half a century: the committee's charter was allowed to lapse, women's rights advocates were replaced with GOP party loyalists, and the organization's purview was restricted to family and health issues.[14]

THE FEW FEMINIST—or even perceived-to-be feminist—pundits that managed to find a forum in this cacophony received a less than congenial reception. "I wanted to walk barefoot on broken glass across the Brooklyn Bridge, up to that despicable woman's apartment, grab her by the neck, drag her down to ground zero and force her to say that to the firefighters," *New York Post* columnist Rod Dreher ranted on September 20, 2001. The object of his venom was Susan Sontag and the less than five hundred words she had famously contributed to the *New Yorker* on the subject of 9/11. What was so "despicable"? Was it her suggestion that "a few shreds of historical awareness might help us to understand what has just happened, and what may continue to happen"? Or perhaps it was her weariness over the muscle-flexing mantras: "Who doubts that America is strong? But that's not all America has to be." Dreher was too busy seething to specify his objections. In any case, he was not alone in his overheated fury. The *New Republic* ranked Sontag with Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. Former *New Republic* editor Andrew Sullivan called her an "ally of evil" and "deranged." Yet another *New York Post* columnist, John Podhoretz, said she suffered from "moral idiocy." *National Review*'s Jay Nordlinger accused her of having "always hated America and the West and freedom and democratic goodness." In an article titled "Blame America at Your Peril," *Newsweek*'s Jonathan Alter charged the "haughty" Sontag

with dressing the nation in girl's clothes. It was "ironic," he wrote, that "the same people urging us to not blame the victim in rape cases are now saying Uncle Sam wore a short skirt and asked for it."[15]

Sontag was no more provocative than any number of male left-leaning intellectuals and pundits whose remarks sparked criticism but nowhere near the personal and moral evisceration that she was made to endure. No one called them, as Sontag was called in the *Chicago Tribune*, "stupefyingly dumb."[16] A few nights before Sontag's *New Yorker* article was published, ABC's *Politically Incorrect* host, Bill Maher, raised hackles when he remarked that flying an airplane into a building was hardly "cowardly." FedEx and Sears pulled ads and a dozen local affiliates suspended the show's broadcast. But in the media court of opinion, Maher received a comparatively gentle dressing down—and was then forgiven and even feted after he made the electronic rounds, seeking absolution. (Rush Limbaugh actually defended Maher, saying, "In a way, he was right.") ABC pulled the plug on *Politically Incorrect* the next year when the show's contract expired. The network contended that the show just wasn't making enough money; Maher maintained his remarks sealed his doom. He wasn't out in the cold for long: in a matter of months he was back on the air with his own HBO show.[17]*

*Maher was, in fact, echoing conservative writer Dinesh D'Souza, a guest on the show, who had just said of the terrorists, "These are warriors." Maher agreed and added, "We have been the cowards lobbing cruise missiles from two thousand miles away." After Maher made his apologies to, among other father confessors, Jay Leno, Bill O'Reilly, and Howard Stern, he received media support from some surprising corners. Even O'Reilly was sympathetic, choosing to construe Maher's remark about "lobbing cruise missiles" as criticism of the Clinton administration, not the troops. "I don't like a lot of the things that Bill Maher has said in the past," Fox's conservative host Sean Hannity said on *Hannity & Colmes*. "But I do think there is this mentality out there to jump on somebody, never give them an opportunity for clarification, never give them an opportunity to apologize." *National Review*'s Jay Nordlinger, who had heaped such scorn on Sontag, declared his support for Maher and his program: "I liked the show, approved of it, appeared on it." (Needless to say, no denunciations of their fellow conservative, Dinesh D'Souza, were tendered.) More mainstream venues and pundits went even further, paying tribute to Maher as a free-speech patriot. "*Politically Incorrect* is downright American," a *BusinessWeek* writer declared. "To see Maher—the always irrepressible, often irritating wiseacre—sitting rigid next to Leno as he explained himself was to watch McCarthyism-in-the-making."

But the stoning of Sontag went on and on. More than a year after the offending issue of the *New Yorker* had departed the newsstands, former New York mayor Ed Koch was inveighing against her. "Susan Sontag will occupy the Ninth Circle of Hell," he declared in a radio address in December 2002. "I will no longer read her works."[18]

Anyone who has followed the commentaries of feminist writer Katha Pollitt in the *Nation* knows she can stir the pot. But pot stirring hardly describes her subdued and almost mournful October 8, 2001, column, in which she related her discussion with her thirteen-year-old daughter about whether to fly an American flag from their apartment window. Pollitt pointed out the flag's historic use as a symbol of "jingoism and vengeance and war"; her daughter said she was wrong, that the flag "means standing together and honoring the dead and saying no to terrorism." Pollitt agreed that, sadly, "The Stars and Stripes is the only available symbol right now." She closed by lamenting the lack of "symbolic representations right now for the things the world really needs—equality and justice and humanity and solidarity and intelligence."[19]

These words unleashed a torrent of wrath. Pollitt noted with some amazement that she had received more hostile responses to that column "than on anything I've ever written." The harangue came from across the political media spectrum, from *Dissent* to the *Washington Post* to the *Washington Times*. She was called a bad mother, charged with, variously, "lunacy," "ignorance," "idiocy," "facile insipidities," and designated one of the "chattering asses." The *Chicago Sun-Times* excerpted a few lines of her piece under the headline "Oh, Shut Up." "We're at war, sweetheart,"

The few dissenting male journalists who were harshly punished, it's worth noting, had called Bush's manhood into question. At the Grant Pass, Oregon, *Daily Courier*, Dan Guthrie was fired after he wrote that Bush had "skedaddled" the day of the attacks. Tom Gutting at the *Texas City Sun* lost his job after he wrote that Bush flew across the United States "like a scared child" ("Bill Maher on the Defensive," *The O'Reilly Factor*, Fox News Network, September 20, 2001; "Interview with Dennis Prager, Ellen Ratner," *Hannity & Colmes*, Fox News Network, September 21, 2001; Jay Nordlinger, "Bush *Knew*? 'Dr. Win the War.' The Pearl Video. And More," *National Review Online*, May 20, 2002; Ciro Scotti, "Politically Incorrect Is Downright American," *BusinessWeek Online*, September 26, 2001; Linda Diebel, "Freedom of Speech Casualty of a New War," *Toronto Star*, October 3, 2001).

a column in the *New York Post* instructed her. "Pollitt, honey, it's time to take your brain to the dry cleaners." Both the *Weekly Standard* and the *New York Post* published her address so readers could inundate her daughter with flags. During a radio interview on an NPR talk show, Katha Pollitt was taken aback when Andrew Sullivan accused her of supporting the Taliban and then, in an almost verbatim repeat of the *Newsweek* commentator's attack on Sontag, likened her, she recalled, "to someone who refuses to help a rape victim and blames her for wearing a short skirt."[20]

In the midst of the fracas, Pollitt came home one day to a message on her answering machine. "You should just go back to Afghanistan, you bitch," a male voice said. Pollitt played the tape for her daughter. "And a little later," Pollitt recalled, "she came to me and said, 'You know, I think you might have been right about the flag.'"[21]

The novelist Barbara Kingsolver was similarly bewildered by the fierce response to two op-ed pieces she wrote for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Los Angeles Times*—in which she appealed to "our capacity of mercy" and proposed that one of "a hundred ways to be a good citizen" was to learn "honest truths from wrongful deaths." Two weeks later she reported that "I've already been called every name in the Rush Limbaugh handbook: traitor, sinner, naïve, liberal, peacenik, whiner. . . . Some people are praying for my immortal soul, and some have offered to buy me a one-way ticket out of the country, to anywhere." The *Los Angeles Times* received a letter from a collection agency owner who called Kingsolver's essay "nothing less than another act of terror" and "pure sedition"; he promised to subject Kingsolver to "the most massive personal and business investigation ever conducted on an individual" and to send the results to the FBI, because "this little horror of a human being" needed to be "surveilled."

Things only got worse after the *Wall Street Journal* ran a piece by writer Gregg Easterbrook claiming Kingsolver had said the American flag stood for "bigotry, sexism, homophobia and shoving the Constitution through a paper shredder." (She had actually said the exact opposite, that the flag *shouldn't* stand for these things.) The story was accompanied by a cartoon of a wild-haired figure on a soapbox wearing an "I [Heart] Osama" T-shirt. The misquote was picked up in scores of publications, including

Stars and Stripes. "It became *the* most quoted thing I ever said," Kingsolver told me, "and I didn't say it." The *New Republic* put her on "Idiocy Watch"; the *Chicago-Sun Times* denounced her "vicious and unpatriotic drivel" and "hatred of America"; the *National Review* called her "hysterical," "moronic," and, more obscurely, "Miss Metternich," and even the alternative paper, the *Tucson Weekly*, in the town where Kingsolver had lived for a quarter century, sneered with the headline "The Bean Trees Must've Fallen on Her Head." Kingsolver's family received threatening mail; a trustee at Kingsolver's alma mater sought to revoke her honorary degree; invitations, both social and professional, were retracted; and readers shipped back copies of her books "with notes saying, 'I don't want this trash in my house,'" Kingsolver recalled. Her efforts to correct the record were spurned. After Kingsolver's attorney wrote the *Wall Street Journal* to protest the mangling of her words, a dismissive letter arrived from the newspaper's associate general counsel, Stuart D. Karle, who deemed the article "a perfectly reasonable interpretation of Ms. Kingsolver's text." He added strangely that Kingsolver seemed to believe the flag's stars should now symbolize not the fifty states but "entertainers of the moment" like Julia Roberts and Britney Spears. No retraction was forthcoming.[22]

The scenario repeated whenever a feminist-minded writer dared challenge the party line. Epithets were hurled at novelist Arundhati Roy ("repulsive," "foaming-at-the-mouth," "ungracious operator")—for pointing out pertinent historical facts about America's role in the mujaheddin's rise and for suggesting that "it will be a pity if, instead of using this as an opportunity to try to understand why September 11 happened, Americans use it as an opportunity to usurp the whole world's sorrow to mourn and avenge only their own." Columnist Naomi Klein was deemed traitorous—for suggesting that an international response to terrorism might be more effective than a unilateral one. (William Bennett claimed she was "taking from us" our "right to self-defense.") Humorist Fran Lebowitz was denounced as "disloyal" on an MSNBC talk show—for finding humor in Bush's shoot-'em-up rhetoric. Female journalists who so much as reported on the treatment of these women were roughed up, too. While researching a story on the post-9/11 attacks on dissenters, *Vanity Fair* columnist Leslie Bennetts made the mistake of phoning the *New York*

Post's John Podhoretz. She asked him if he had any regrets about accusing Sontag of "moral idiocy." He didn't. After a few brief questions, she rang off. Two days later, Bennetts opened the *Post* to find Podhoretz had devoted his latest column to an attack on *her*. "I was getting this for simply *raising* these issues," Bennetts marveled.[23]

Even feminists across the border weren't safe. "Never before—or at least not since the War Measures Act—have I watched such a calculated, hot and hateful propaganda campaign," *Toronto Star*'s columnist Michele Landsberg observed. She was referring to the response, in the United States and Canada, to some remarks at an Ottawa women's rights conference on October 1, 2001. One conference panelist, Sunera Thobani, a University of British Columbia women's studies professor, had said that Third World women might be dubious about the U.S. government's vow to "save" them, considering that American foreign policy in the past had spurred "prolific levels of violence all over the world." Overnight, Thobani became the favorite media and blogosphere whipping girl, dubbed "sick," "hateful and destructive," "Communist-linked," guilty of "sucking on the front teat of society," and "shockingly similar to Osama bin Laden." She was inundated with so much hate mail and violent pornography and so many death threats that the university assigned her security guards. Even so, when the Ottawa police received a formal hate-crimes complaint, the anonymously filed grievance was submitted not on Thobani's behalf but against her. The accuser charged her with "publicly inciting hatred against Americans."[24]

Some weeks into these media drubbings, Barbara Kingsolver picked up *Newsweek* and came across Jonathan Alter's article "Blame America at Your Peril," which singled out her, Susan Sontag, and Arundhati Roy for yet another round of reprimand and ridicule. "And I understood when I read that piece that Arundhati and Susan and I were the bad girls who had been mounted on poles for public whipping," she told me. "They whipped us with words like *bitch* and *airhead* and *moron* and *silly*." At first, the patronizing tone made Kingsolver think that the detractors regarded her and the other women as children. "But if we were so silly and moronic, why was it so important to bring us up and attack us again and again and again? The response was not the response you would expect toward a child. It was more like we were witches."[25]

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WITH SO MANY feminist-minded writers disenfranchised by the post-9/11 press, such calumny stood unchallenged. There was no counterpoint perspective to blunt its force. In fact, a feminist perspective on *any* topic was increasingly AWOL. This reality was reinforced to me on a morning three years after 9/11, as I sat in a dim back room of the public library in Portland, Oregon, scrolling through reels of faded microfilm. I had been invited to speak at the thirtieth anniversary of a graduate fellowship program for women. Perhaps it was the gilt-framed oil portraits of the city's founding fathers, all of them whiskered, staring down at me as I ascended the library's marble staircase, that led me to indulge in some Pollyanna thoughts about how far my sex had come in the last three decades. In any event, I decided it might hearten the female "fellows" to hear some evidence of progress from the antediluvian days of their fellowship's first year. My search, however, unearthed an opposite trend.

In the yellowing pages of the 1973–74 *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, I found a category titled "Women's Liberation Movement"—with a list of stories that reported in overwhelmingly favorable terms on women's clamor for change. Under "Women," another long string of stories reported on efforts to expose sex discrimination and advance women's rights in virtually every occupation—from architecture to construction, fine arts to sports, publishing to plumbing. These weren't just stories in *Ms.* magazine. Publications like *Christianity Today* and *New Catholic World* boasted the headlines "First at the Cradle, Last at the Cross," "Liberation of Mother Church," "Bless Me, Mother," and "All We're Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation." Even *Motor Boat and Sailing* magazine was offering "Skipper Is a Ms.," "Sailors Lib," and "No Men Aboard." Prominent feminist bylines included Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, Kate Millett, Vivian Gornick, Juliet Mitchell, Phyllis Chesler, Mary Daly, Ellen Willis, Barbara Deming, Jo Freeman, Nora Ephron, and Helen Reddy, and magazines featured interviews with feminists from Simone de Beauvoir to Rita Mae Brown.[26]

Then I pulled the 2004 *Readers' Guide* off the shelf to see what was listed under "Women's Liberation Movement." The category had been

discontinued; readers were advised to see "Feminism." But judging by its contents, "Feminism" had become little more than a repository for the paltry remains of the women's liberation movement and, especially, for obituaries celebrating the movement's demise. The category featured antifeminist articles from the *Weekly Standard*, *Reason*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Commentary* (which hailed "the end of the era of feminism"), and *Society* (which declared "the looming failure of the feminist project" and equated feminist efforts to challenge sex differences with "the effort by the German Nazis to craft The New Aryan Man"). Other stories listed under "Feminism" could most charitably be characterized as "postfeminist"—like "Beautiful Girl," a feature on the life of a supermodel, or the article in *Men's Health* called "Babes in Boyland." Only a few stories actually expressed a feminist point of view—nearly all of them by Katha Pollitt.[27]

I flipped to the "Women" section and scanned the subheadings for more authentically feminist entries. While there were a few (particularly when the subject was women's oppression in Islamic countries), they were vastly outnumbered by articles of the "Beautiful Girl" variety. The categories "Women in Motion Pictures" and "Women in the Motion Picture Industry" offered such headlines as "Killer Chicks" and "Six Crazy Men and a Blonde," along with articles on the remakes of *Charlie's Angels* and *The Stepford Wives*. "Women in TV" offered "Invasion of the Dumb Blonds" and stories about mean girls on reality TV shows and catfights on *Desperate Housewives*. "Women in Literature" and "Women Authors" offered "The Chick-Lit Challenge" and "Breaking Out Bombshells." The category "Women Disc Jockeys" listed only one article, called "Barenaked Ladies." I leafed back some pages to see if there might be something more elevating under "Female"—and came on the subcategory "Female Friendships," where a lengthy list gave me hope for a refreshing alternative. Then I read the headlines: "All She Does Is Complain," "She Thinks Her Life Matters More than Mine," "She Never Has Time for Me Anymore," "Can You Truly Trust an Office Friend?," and "I Can't Stand Her New Husband." Two articles on the list promised sisterhood of a sort: one was called "Shopping Buddies," the other "Two Women Joined by Murder."[28]

This depressing selection didn't emerge overnight. Perusing the *Readers' Guide* from the late nineties, I could see what Geeta Rao Gupta called "the fault lines that already exist." But those lines were clearly accentuated in the years after 9/11. By 2004, the difference between where we once were and where we now seemed to be was an untraversable chasm.

IN THE AFTERMATH of September 11, you didn't have to be a feminist to feel the purge. Soon after the World Trade Center vaporized into two biblical plumes of smoke, another vanishing act occurred on television sets and newspaper pages across the country. Women began disappearing.

The morning after the attack, Geneva Overholser opened the *Washington Post* and turned to the opinion section, where she had formerly written the ombudsman column. She saw that the editors had responded to the disaster by doubling the section's size. The expansion, however, only magnified a certain contraction. "Instead of the typical five opinion columns, there were ten," Overholser noted. "And every one was written by a man." Nor would that morning's paper prove anomalous. "A few days into that awful time," Overholser later wrote, "I started to notice a haunting silence amid the views I was finding in America's newspapers: it was the absence of women's voices." As one of the few women to have run a major American newspaper, the *Des Moines Register*, Overholser had long been aware of the gender imbalances in her profession. During her tenure as editor in chief in the late eighties and early nineties, the *Des Moines Register* increased coverage of so-called women's issues and won a Pulitzer Prize for its reporting on the media's treatment of rape victims. But this latest setback for women seemed to come with a new and insulting twist. "Here we have the editors at the *Washington Post* expanding their opinion-column inches dramatically because they understood how important it was to give voice to more people at this crucial time," Overholser told me. "And yet it still didn't occur to them to expand those voices to women."[29]

Nor would it occur to their brethren at the nation's other leading newspapers. At the end of the first week after 9/11, Overholser reviewed the eighty-eight opinion pieces in the *New York Times*, the *Washington*

Post, and the *Los Angeles Times*. Only five, she found, had female bylines. Three weeks after 9/11, the media watchdog group Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) counted the op-ed bylines in the nation's major newspapers and reported similar results: the *New York Times* had now run seventy-nine opinion pieces—eight by women. (In the same three weeks a month earlier, by my count, the *Times* had run seventy-three opinion pieces, sixteen by women; in other words, the female bylines on the *Times*'s op-ed page had dropped from 22 percent to 9 percent). The *Washington Post* was even worse: it had published 107 commentaries in the three weeks after 9/11—and only seven were by women. The phenomenon wasn't restricted to centrist publications, either. On October 8, 2001, the *Nation*'s cover announced "A Just Response," a set of commentaries on the terrorist attack. All of them were by men. In fact, with the exception of Katha Pollitt's regular column (which that week was the much-decried flag story), the entire issue—including articles unrelated to 9/11, the books and arts section, and even the illustrations—was a male production.[30]

Marie Wilson was watching the same attrition in another medium. The president of the feminist White House Project flipped from CBS's *Face the Nation* to NBC's *Meet the Press* to ABC's *This Week* to CNN's *Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer* to *Fox News Sunday* and wondered: where are the women? As it happened, the White House Project was in the midst of a study of women's representation on the Sunday talk shows—and in the seven weeks following the attacks, that census recorded a plunge: the number of appearances by American women shrank by nearly 40 percent; all told, less than 10 percent of the total number of guests in that period were women. On *This Week*, thirty-two people were invited to speak; only one was a woman.[31]

The disappearances continued as the next year wore on. "Since Sept. 11, pictures of Afghan women in burkas have been seen more often on American television than female talking heads," Boston University journalism professor Caryl Rivers observed on the online *Women's eNews*, one of the rare media outlets registering the decline.[32] At the end of 2002, Rivers leafed through the last twelve issues of a venerable national magazine published in her backyard. What she saw—or didn't see—troubled her:

> If you're a regular reader of [the *Atlantic*], which I am, you'd think that some sort of plague had decimated the female population. Between December 2001 and December 2002, for example, I found 38 major articles by men and seven by women. Two of these women were writing with their more famous husbands; another was doing an anecdotal piece on cross-dressing. So for serious pieces, the total is 38 to 4. The essays were even worse. During this period, I found 41 essays by men and two by women. Or to be precise, two essays by the same woman. For the *Atlantic*, Margaret Talbot represented all of womanhood.[33]

The situation wasn't much different in the other publications she reviewed. "It hasn't been this bad for women scholars and journalists wanting to influence the national public agenda since the pre–women's movement days when women were completely invisible," Rivers concluded. "We're being systematically overlooked."[34]

The shunning in the media proceeded for the next several years. For the first six months of 2002, more than 75 percent of the Sunday talk shows on CBS, Fox, and NBC featured *no* female guests (Fox was female-free 83 percent of the time). There were other signs of slippage. By the end of 2002, the share of female newspaper executives had dropped to 26 percent (from 29 percent in 2000), the proportion of female top newspaper editors had slid to 20 percent (from 25 percent in 2000), and the number of women in the "heir apparent" second-in-command editor slots had declined to zero. By 2003, the percentage of women in daily newsrooms had fallen for two years running and, by 2004, the percentage of female news directors at TV and radio stations was also showing signs of erosion.[35]

In 2005, FAIR once again counted the male and female bylines on the op-ed pages of the major dailies and once again found whopping gender imbalances. (At the *Washington Post*, women had only 10.4 percent of the bylines. At the *New York Times*, the women had 16.9 percent, still worse than the proportion a month before 9/11, when it stood at 22 percent.) Female commentators on the TV talk shows similarly remained in short supply, and left-of-center female commentators, the FAIR study noted, were "virtually absent." "During the six months studied," FAIR reported,

"only one progressive woman made an appearance on a Sunday panel: Katrina vanden Heuvel of the *Nation* (*Chris Matthews Show*, 2/6/05)." The few slots that did remain for women were overwhelmingly occupied by conservatives.

By the mid-2000s, and despite Katie Couric's much-touted elevation to *CBS Evening News* anchor, women's media profile remained depressed. In 2006, Ruth Davis Konigsberg, an editor at *Glamour* who was struck by the recent masculinizing of bylines in general-interest magazines, crunched the numbers and found dismayingly lopsided ratios of male-to-female writers: 3:1 on average, 4:1 in the *New Yorker*, and 7:1 in *Harper's*. That November, television news coverage of the national election reflected the new realities. How had we wound up in this "throwback to the days of Brylcreem and cigarette smoke," *New York Times* critic Alessandra Stanley asked two days later. "Tuesday night's tableau of men talking to men all across prime time was oddly atavistic, a stag party circa 1962."[36]

Jennifer L. Pozner, the executive director of Women in Media & News, was among the few to go looking for an explanation for the disappearance of women from the media in the months after 9/11. The answers she got were less than satisfying. "Listen, this is a war situation," the executive producer of CBS's *Face the Nation* said when asked about the show's sudden paucity of female guests; gender was no longer pertinent. "We're a half-hour show; we can't have on everyone." The executive producer of NBC's *Meet the Press* told Pozner that the show's largely female audience would be "insulted" if the network were to "try to manipulate" the news to invite women instead of just "delivering newsmakers." "So, there are 'newsmakers,' and then there are women?" Pozner wondered. Significantly, the talk shows failed to invite some obvious 9/11 newsmakers who *were* women: neither Senator Barbara Boxer nor Senator Dianne Feinstein, both chairs of subcommittees on terrorism, was asked to make an appearance. Anyway, women were missing from the *non*-war-situation segments, too. The White House Project found that women on the Sunday talk shows were "underrepresented on every topic and in every category of experience."[37]

In December 2001, the White House Project unveiled what would

be the first of three detailed studies documenting women's media erasure. The media coverage of the project's findings, as a Nexis database search of American newspapers, magazines, and television programs indicated, was sparse: one freelance article in the "Woman News" section of the *Chicago Tribune*, one short comment piece in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and a cursory mention in a TV column in the *Boston Herald*. Over the next several years, various other studies of women's shrinking profile would be similarly disregarded. The silencing of women took place largely in silence.[38]

WHAT MADE THE post-9/11 disappearances of feminist and liberal female voices all the more strange was that, at first, it looked like the terrorist attacks might give the cause of women's equality a new lease on life. One feminist issue, at least, was deemed useful to the Bush White House: the repression of Afghan women. After months of being snubbed, the Feminist Majority Foundation, which had been trying to call attention to the Taliban's abuse of women since 1996, found itself in the astonishing position of playing belle of the capital ball. As did many other feminist groups. At the White House (which had just recently abolished the Office for Women's Initiatives), director of public liaison Lezlee Westine began contacting women's rights organizations and asking them to seek "common ground" with the administration that had iced them since its inception. "Let's really analyze where we can come together," she urged. Martha Burk of the National Council of Women's Organizations received three or four summonses to the White House and, for a while, was fielding calls from administration officials almost once a week.[39]

Feminist leaders were invited to brief, among others, Karen Hughes, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and a bevy of top State Department officials. "They were *anxious* to meet with us," Eleanor Smeal, president of the Feminist Majority, told me. "In fact, they apologized" for not having met sooner—and even for not having more women on staff. Both houses of Congress held hearings on women's status in Afghanistan—in which they enthusiastically applauded Smeal's appeal to "make sure that women are at the table" and

"not treated as a side issue." And the White House held a "women's-only" conference call with members of Congress on the situation of Afghan women.

The feminist message seemed to be adopted. "The central goal of the terrorists is the brutal oppression of women," Bush pronounced before an audience of women's rights activists as he signed the Afghan Women and Children Relief Act on December 12, 2001. Laura Bush gave the first First Lady presidential radio address "to kick off a world-wide effort," as she put it, "to focus on the brutality against women and children by the al-Qaida terrorist network and the regime it supports in Afghanistan, the Taliban." Colin Powell announced that "the rights of the women of Afghanistan will not be negotiable," and his State Department issued with much fanfare a "Report on the Taliban's War against Women," adorned with quotes from Afghan women detailing their oppression and even a poem from anthropologist and activist Zieba Shorish-Shamley's *Look into My World.* "They made me invisible, shrouded and non-being / A shadow, no existence, made silent and unseeing / Denied of freedom, confined to my cage / Tell me how to handle my anger and my rage?"[40]

The governmental glasnost had a counterpart in the media, where images of burka-clad women became a staple of television news and newsweekly features. Journalist Saira Shah's documentary about women under the Taliban, *Beneath the Veil,* made for British television and formerly overlooked and underexposed in America, enjoyed multiple airings on CNN and was excerpted on two of the networks. American press correspondents hastened to Afghanistan to write about "a world of ghost women": "blue ghosts," "walking ghosts," "shrouded ghosts," "downtrodden ghosts," and "silent ghosts." The media seemed riveted by that feminine silence and made some effort, albeit generally unsuccessful, to get these women to speak. "Over the last week I've been rebuffed by dozens of Afghan women," *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof regretfully reported. Back home, press inquiries about the Taliban's oppression of women poured into the Feminist Majority, which had previously had so much trouble drawing media interest to the subject that it had been reduced to sending a letter about Afghan women's plight to "Dear Abby."[41]

And then it stopped. As soon as the bombs began dropping over Afghanistan in early October 2001, the White House claims of concern for women's rights came to a halt. The "betrayal by the Bush administration," as the national coordinator of the Feminist Majority cast it, came swiftly. One moment the Bush administration was declaring that "the restoration of women's rights" was the centerpiece of its mission in Afghanistan, the next it was busy bartering those rights away. "Right now we have other priorities," a senior administration official told the *New York Times* when asked, only two and a half weeks into the invasion of Afghanistan, what role women's rights would have in a future government. "We have to be careful not to look like we are imposing our values on them." The Bush administration–sanctioned final government draft of the Afghan constitution did not include an equal rights guarantee. After much protest from women's groups and women delegates to the Loya Jirga council on the constitution in January 2004, a guarantee was inserted, though hardly enforced. In the months and years to come, as Afghan women's lives once again became perilous, there would be no more calls to "kick off a worldwide effort" on behalf of women and no more claims purveyed that women's issues were nonnegotiable.[42]

In the media, too, women's rights in Afghanistan were abandoned as a cause, surviving only in sporadic regurgitations by mostly male voices. The most heralded of the American "feminist" contributions to the women of Afghanistan were beauty tips. "One of the first dramatic signs of liberation," *Afghan Communicator,* an English-language magazine, reported, "was the return of Afghan women to beauty salons." Backed by more than a million dollars from Revlon, Clairol, L'Oréal, Mac, and America's leading fashion magazines, "beauticians without borders" made repeated pilgrimages to Kabul to train a new generation of hair and makeup stylists. An American-backed beauty school even operated out of the new Afghani Women's Ministry, until government officials soured on its presence. *Vogue* contributed $25,000 to the effort and bestowed the "Anna Wintour Award" (a $500 pair of scissors) on one of the beauty school's graduates, Trina Ahmedi, for her way with a mascara wand. The feature film *The Beauty Academy of Kabul* was soon playing in American cineplexes. The endeavor was not without a certain utility: in Afghanistan, a beautician

could earn more than a doctor and could ply her trade from home, an advantage in a nation where, despite the supposed defeat of the burka, many women were still housebound. But the target audience for this campaign was always here in the United States. The beauty industry was celebrating, as its representatives put it repeatedly, American women's "freedom of choice."[43]

Very quickly, women's rights went from being a reason to invade Afghanistan to an irrelevancy. The conservative media, which had never really supported a feminist campaign on behalf of Afghan women, saluted this turn of events. "Liberals should not support the war because the Taliban is hostile to feminism," the *National Review* instructed on November 5, 2001, in an article titled "What We're Not Fighting For." The magazine's list of "nots," which included "short skirts, dancing, and secularism" and the right to an abortion, was illustrated with a photograph of Britney Spears with a bared midriff. "They should support it because they are patriots." In the *Washington Times*, Cliff Kincaid, president of America's Survival, railed against U.S. feminist involvement in Afghanistan's reconstruction. "The Afghan people need food, water and shelter, not social experimentation directed by the National Organization for Women," he said. "This feminist interference in Afghanistan's future could give the term 'Ugly American' new meaning."[44]

Giving new meaning to "damned if you do, damned if you don't," conservative writers simultaneously harangued feminists for *abandoning* women's concerns in Afghanistan. "At the very moment feminists should be finishing the battle that they began, they are nowhere to be found," Sarah Wildman claimed in the *New Republic*. "As news of the appalling miseries of women in the Islamic world has piled up, where are the feminists?" Manhattan Institute's Kay Hymowitz demanded to know. "Where's the outrage?" After a dismissive one-sentence nod to the Feminist Majority's long-standing campaign for Afghan women's rights, she went on to insist: "You haven't heard a peep from feminists. . . . They have averted their eyes from the harsh, blatant oppression of millions of women, even while they have continued to stare into the Western patriarchal abyss, indignant over female executives who cannot join an exclusive golf club and college women who do not have their own lacrosse teams."[45]

Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times* echoed that same bizarre claim in a somewhat different context. One of many journalists to become fixated on the scourge of "sex-slave trafficking" in the post-9/11 period (to the neglect of *work*-slave trafficking, a far more common problem), Kristof famously launched a one-man crusade to buy two Cambodian prostitute girls from their keepers. (His effort boomeranged when one of the girls fled her liberation and returned to the brothel.) In the midst of that campaign, the columnist rounded on the very feminist groups that had been fighting for women's rights in the Third World for years. Organizations like the Feminist Majority were "complacent on trafficking" and "shamefully lackadaisical about an issue that should be near the top of any feminist agenda," he wrote.[46]

Why would some pundits who were themselves sympathetic to the plight of Afghan women be so hostile to the American women combating that selfsame evil? That conundrum revealed a subtle yet profound distinction: the pundits were caught up in a separate drama that didn't have much to do with the feminist cause. If anything, feminists were seen as rivals who threatened to hijack the drama's starring roles. Behind the media fascination with Taliban oppression lay a desire to promote not women's rights but American chivalry. Which may explain why so much of the post-9/11 media coverage revolved around rescue fantasies instead of female liberation. Story after story seemed to confirm that America was "saving" women, if only from their burkas.

Dozens of dispatches reported with smug self-congratulation on the morning the U.S. troops took Kabul and a handful of women on the street celebrated by casting aside their floor-length veils. A condescending *Newsweek* article described a "giggling and babbling" circle of women who were so grateful they sprinkled a reporter with confetti and offered to wash her hair. The media made much, too, of the U.S. military's supposed "rescue" of two American women who were among eight aid workers jailed by the Taliban for three months for preaching Christianity. "I want to thank our military for rescuing these girls," Bush said of Heather Mercer and Dayna Curry, who were, in fact, adult women and who had been freed by Northern Alliance soldiers, not American troops. *Newsweek*'s headline announced that these two women had been "Delivered from

Evil," and the accompanying story took pains to note that Curry (who was thirty years old) was known as a "real girl" who "likes to wear cute clothes and fix her hair." CNN correspondent Tom Mintier enthused that the "girls'" story "sounded like the script from a Hollywood movie, but this was real life." That same week, CNN rushed to air *Unholy War*, the sequel to the documentary *Beneath the Veil*, which narrowed its focus to the attempted media rescue of three motherless little girls who had appeared in the first film. In an interview with Larry King, *Beneath the Veil* director Cassian Harrison said the concentration on the girls was warranted because their "image" was "a metaphor for the entire situation inside Afghanistan."[47]

Or maybe Afghanistan was a metaphor for the girl, the nation as female captive abducted by molesting desperadoes and waiting passively for virile America to save her from degradation. The captivity-and-rescue metaphor underlay Bush's declaration on the first anniversary of 9/11 that we had "raised this lamp of liberty to every captive land."[48] It was evident, too, in the words of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who crowed in an interview with National Public Radio, in February 2002, that the United States had saved Afghan women: "Women have stopped being repressed. They can actually walk out in the street and not have their entire faces and bodies covered by burkas. They can laugh on the street." Whether they could actually wield power, he didn't say. The persistence of the rescue language was a sign of an insidious differentiation that had prevailed from the start. Coming to the rescue of women was a cause to be celebrated, as long as the rescuers were men and as long as the women acted as if they needed rescuing.[49] Interestingly, the initiative for Afghani women that the Bush administration most adamantly opposed was financing for women-run NGOs in Afghanistan. For all the talk about women being pivotal to democracy, the only proposal by feminist leaders that the White House seriously pursued was an office to monitor sex trafficking. If women proved capable of fending for themselves, if they laid claim to agency instead of violation and dependency, the rescue drama fell to pieces.[50]

A couple of years later, the administration was again claiming to come to the defense of women's rights—this time in Iraq. The State Department unveiled the Iraqi Women's Democracy Initiative, a grant program "to

help women become full and vibrant partners in Iraq's developing democracy." That this pledge was less than heartfelt might be deduced from the announcement made that same day, identifying one of the first grant recipients: the antifeminist Independent Women's Forum. Once more, the narrative of female captives and male saviors prevailed over the lip service to female independence. Once more, a nation became the metaphor for the girl. As the December 17, 2001, cover of *National Review* cast it early on, Iraq was a violated country "in need of rescue from its regime." Bush spoke incessantly of avenging Hussein's "rape rooms" but rarely of safeguarding Iraqi women's status as one of the most emancipated female populations in the Muslim world (a status they would soon lose, following the American invasion). In the years to come, the same sex-coded rescue language would be invoked to justify the quagmire. America would never abandon Iraq or any nation, President Bush vowed, that wasn't "capable of defending herself."[51]