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# *The Feminist Majority Foundation's Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid*

## THE INTERSECTIONS OF FEMINISM AND IMPERIALISM IN THE UNITED STATES

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### Abstract

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This essay offers a critical analysis of the Feminist Majority Foundation's Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan in terms of its synchronicity with US imperialism and militarism. While the FMF's Campaign draws public attention to the discrimination and violence facing Afghan women under the Taliban, its discourse is embedded in an ahistorical and Orientalist framework that assumes the benevolence and superiority of the US in establishing gender equality. Thus, the FMF reproduces an imperial feminism tied to US state interests in empire building – a feminism that evades accountability for the consequences of US militarism while it establishes its own power and authority in determining the future of Afghanistan. The imperial feminism of the FMF is an example of how actions taken to challenge hegemony can in fact support and reify the hegemonic projects of the state. In effect, the FMF draws upon the same imperialist and problematic ideas about women as those expressed by the Bush administration to protect Afghan women in the name of empire.

### Keywords

Afghanistan, gender apartheid, imperial feminism, international feminism, Orientalism, US militarism

### INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of 11 September 2001 (9/11), the Bush administration justified the 'war on terrorism', specifically in relation to Afghanistan, in part by the notion that the US must act in order to 'save Afghan women'

and to restore women's human rights. The US media built on this justification by flooding the news with images and stories about the plight of women in the Taliban's Afghanistan. As a result, many in the US were alerted to some of the harsh realities of women's lives in Afghanistan and this in turn affirmed US military and political intervention as a legitimate method of establishing 'gender equality'. Feminists were divided over the US response to 9/11, particularly with respect to the invasion of Afghanistan. The Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), for instance, did not join in the public mobilization against the military invasion but rather welcomed the focus on the Taliban's gender apartheid and gender violence. The FMF, in conjunction with many other feminist and human rights organizations in the USA, had been spearheading a 'Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan' campaign since the mid-1990s. Thus, they saw the post-9/11 'war on terrorism' as a political opportunity to fulfill their stated goals of ending 'gender apartheid' and 'restoring' women's human rights in Afghanistan.

In contrast, many other explicitly anti-imperialist feminists in the USA and around the world critically responded to what they saw as the cynical appropriation of feminist ideas by the Bush administration to justify its unjustifiable 'war on terrorism' (see Hawthorne and Winter 2002). The Feminist Majority Foundation, despite its counter-hegemonic politics against gender violence, reaffirmed, rather than rejected, the project of US imperialism and retaliatory violence as a method of maintaining US power. Because there are divisions in feminist responses to US wars after 9/11, it is important to speculate about what groups such as the FMF gain from colluding with the hegemonic projects of the US state.

In this essay, I explore the relationship between the justification for the US invasion of Afghanistan and its connection to the arguments of the Feminist Majority Foundation's campaign to 'Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan'. I examine the mutual constitutiveness between the Bush administration's rhetorical claim to 'saving Afghan women' as a pretext to war and the FMF's campaign efforts to support women's rights in Afghanistan. While the FMF's campaign has brought public attention to some of the realities of women's lives under the Taliban since the mid-1990s, it does so from a framework of 'imperial feminism'<sup>1</sup> that ultimately serves to bolster US world hegemony and empire. This 'imperial feminist' awareness has circulated within US and European feminisms as well as colonialisms from the nineteenth century to the present in relation to empire building (e.g. Ahmed 1992; Terborg-Penn 1998; Koikari 2002). It is a feminism that focuses exclusively on the gender-based oppression of 'third world' women and does so 'without acknowledging the role of racism, colonialism and economic exploitation'; it 'claims solidarity with Third World women and women of color, but in actuality contributes to the stereotyping of Third World cultures as "barbaric" and "uncivilized"', which then justifies imperialist intervention (Sudbury 2000, referencing Amos and Parmar 1984).

The FMF campaign assumes 'Western' superiority through its ahistorical and Orientalist focus on 'the veil' and gender segregation as symbolic of women's

oppression and its implicit assumption that the US embodies gender equality and women's human rights. This Orientalist logic constructs an absolute difference between the 'West' and the 'East'/'self' and 'other'. It does so by erasing the history and politics of Afghanistan and by projecting a cultural barbarity in need of a civilizing mission. Western women and feminism become the embodiment of Afghanis' hope for democracy. The assumption of superiority and benevolence is possible because the FMF evades its own implication in the politics of the region and condones the terms of imperialism—the right to control, the right to invade and the right to occupy under the guise of 'liberating' women and creating a 'gender equality' resonant with so-called Western standards (Ahmed 1992; Janiewski 2001). The campaign is mostly silent with respect to a history of US global geopolitical involvement in and contributions to the rise of the Taliban and fundamentalism in Afghanistan. Even in its current critique of the US military's failure to provide adequate security forces and lack of follow through in supporting women's rights in Afghanistan, the FMF never questions the underlying premises of the US invasion and the right to control the future of Afghanistan.

This analysis is done in the interests of considering the ways in which the Feminist Majority Campaign reifies US hegemony by supporting US imperial control under the illusory guise of 'protection' and 'security', 'democracy' and 'freedom'. As Sinha points out, 'neither feminisms nor women are ever articulated *outside* macropolitical structures that condition and delimit their political effects' (2000: 1078; emphasis in original). In this case, the geopolitics of US imperialism, packaging itself as a movement to create democracy and 'freedom' through militarism and force, uses the rhetoric of the Feminist Majority's Campaign to serve its own interests; and the Feminist Majority Campaign ultimately accepts the terms of this imperialism to serve *its own interests*—to stop what they conceive as the problem facing women in Afghanistan—*gender apartheid*<sup>2</sup>—and to do so by any means necessary. More importantly, the FMF's efforts affirm its power and positionality within the US as a universal feminist enterprise consistent with US hegemony. Similar to how British middle-class feminism built itself in relation to India, 'produced within the prevailing and symbiotically connected discourses of empire and nation' (Sinha 2000: 1079), so the FMF Campaign is built in and through the discourses of contemporary US imperialism.

It is imperative for US feminists interested in transnational solidarity to critically interrogate feminist efforts in terms of how they are intricately and integrally tied to US state interests and to the imperialism of US geopolitics. As Janiewski (2001) argues, US-based international feminisms, while seemingly oriented toward solidarity, have often engaged in the projects of imperialist and hegemonic power. Without a recognition and refusal of the terms of empire, the FMF's campaign bolsters US world hegemony and contributes to the multiple and interlocking systems of oppression and privilege shaping the lives of Afghan women. An explicitly anti-imperialist feminism, by way of contrast, resists US hegemonic and imperial state interests by implicating

itself in the working of US power rather than aligning with it. It critically interrogates and dismantles the assumption of 'Western' supremacy and superiority with regard to gender equality, democracy and freedom. It comes to the table with recognition of its accountability for its powerful location and recognition of the deeply rooted interconnectedness between the systems of oppression and privilege within and outside of the USA. Thus, as Alexander and Mohanty (1997) argue, transnational feminist solidarity is predicated on a critical analysis of empire with a political praxis that disrupts rather than reproduces relations of domination. Before exploring the FMF's relationship with US power, I turn first to the specificities of the Bush administration's hegemonic project of imperial feminism.

### THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION'S 'IMPERIAL FEMINISM'

Soon after 9/11, as the Bush administration zeroed in on Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, it capitalized on an already circulating imperial feminist discourse regarding the Taliban's mistreatment of women. In building a justification for the war against Afghanistan, the Bush administration and the corporate media constructed a narrative of moral outrage against the Taliban's oppression of women that they linked to the terrorism of al Qaeda. By linking the US invasion to the rescue of Afghan women, Hirji (2005: 1) argues, the Bush administration was able to render 'the conflict more palatable to their citizens'. The Bush administration packaged the invasion of Afghanistan as a heroic and noble action by claiming that its mission was 'to restore human rights to Afghan women'; this mission mostly overshadowed the question of the right to invade a sovereign country—Afghanistan—and to overthrow the government (Hirji 2005: 1).

Since 9/11, in his major public addresses, President Bush consistently mentions the oppression of women by the Taliban (e.g. 'women are executed in Kabul's soccer stadium. They can be beaten for wearing socks that are too thin' [Bush 2001b] and 'the mothers and daughters of Afghanistan were captives in their own homes—forbidden from working or going to school' [Bush 2002]). The oppression of women is placed within the context of other forms of Taliban restrictions on people's lives; for instance, in the 20 September 2001 call to action against the Taliban and al Qaeda, Bush (2001a) exclaims:

Afghanistan's people have been brutalized . . . Women are not allowed to attend school. You can be jailed for owning a television. Religion can be practiced only as their leaders dictate. A man can be jailed in Afghanistan if his beard is not long enough.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the Bush administration and the mainstream media provided the public with little analysis of the historical and political context of the terrorist attacks and of the US role in the rise of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Instead, Bush's speeches create a spectacle of the Taliban's repression by providing decontextualized and yet vivid images of the Taliban's decrees and punishments, particularly those associated with everyday activities that the people in the US are assumed to understand as essential to 'our way of life' (i.e. watching television, wearing socks, growing a beard). This strategy functions ultimately to shift public knowledge about the situation in Afghanistan from the historical and political to the cultural, from critical analysis to moral outrage.

Laura Bush, in her role as 'First Lady', became 'an integral part of the media campaign focusing on women's rights in Afghanistan' and the necessity for US intervention (Dubriwny 2005: 84). She urged US women to recognize 'our stake in freeing Afghan women from the 'brutal oppression' of the Taliban regime and the terrorists. In her first radio address in November of 2001, she drew connections between the plight of women in Afghanistan, the Taliban and the terrorists responsible for 9/11. In her words:

The brutal oppression of women is a central goal of the terrorists . . . Women have been denied access to doctors when they're sick. Life under the Taliban is so hard and repressive, even small displays of joy are outlawed—children aren't allowed to fly kites; their mothers face beatings for laughing out loud. Women cannot work outside the home, or even leave their homes by themselves . . . Only the terrorists and the Taliban forbid education to women. Only the terrorists and the Taliban threaten to pull out women's fingernails for wearing nail polish. The plight of women and children in Afghanistan is a matter of deliberate cruelty, carried out by those who seek to intimidate and control.

(Bush, L. 2001)

As Shepherd points out, 'the running together of "women and children" . . . infantilizes the women of Afghanistan, denying them both adulthood and agency, affording them only pity and a certain voyeuristic attraction' (2006: 20). In other words, Afghan 'women and children' are made into spectacle by hypervisualizing their victimization by the Taliban; their plight serves as a justification for the heroic invasion, rescue and liberation by the US military. This framing, as Stabile and Kumar suggest, is 'thoroughly Orientalist; it constructed the West as the beacon of civilization with an obligation to tame the Islamic world and liberate its women' (2005: 766). George Bush presents the oppression of women by the Taliban and their need to be liberated by the USA as a central goal of his foreign policy; in his address to the UN in November, 2001, he assures the world: 'The Taliban's days of harboring terrorists and dealing in heroin and brutalizing women are drawing to a close' (Bush 2001b) and then in the January 2002 State of the Union address, he proclaims victory: 'Today women are free, and are part of Afghanistan's new government'

(Bush 2002). Laura Bush's campaign constructs a benevolent and caring USA that brings the women of Afghanistan 'joy' and freedom to carry out their daily activities. In her words:

Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment . . . The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.

(Bush, L. 2001)

The mainstream corporate media contributed the images and stories that built up this rescue narrative. As Ayotte and Hussain (2005: 117) report: 'Burqa-clad figures, potent political symbols of the "evil" of the Taliban, were suddenly everywhere'. Stories about Afghan women proliferated in the year after 9/11; from 12 September 2001 to 1 January 2002 there were 628 broadcast programs and 93 newspaper articles, a significant increase from the year prior to 9/11 (Stabile and Kumar 2005: 772). Images of women wearing the *burqa* were featured on the covers of major magazines and newspapers; these images—on their own—became evidence of women's oppression by the Taliban—by Islam—and by implication, by all Muslim and Arab men (all constructed as coterminous). The images functioned to distinctively mark the 'otherness' of Afghanistan and the Taliban and to justify US military intervention, which would 'unveil' the women thereby securing their 'freedom'. The contrasting assumption that 'Western' women's unveiled bodies are indicative of women's 'freedom' fuels the dichotomy. The assumption that the USA embraces gender equality and women's rights in the USA was central to the discourse that it was the USA's right and responsibility to bring 'democracy' and 'freedom' to the people of Afghanistan, particularly the 'women and children' (Dubriwny 2005; Stabile and Kumar 2005).

The gendered hypervisibility and spectacle of gender inequality in Islamic societies is not new; it has been evident in military, media and scholarly discourses used to justify European colonialism. The media simply drew upon a 'longstanding obsession with the Muslim woman as a silent, veiled figure patiently awaiting rescue from a heroic non-Muslim man' (Hirji 2005: 4). The image constructs a 'rescue fantasy' for Western men, a fantasy with roots in Orientalist scholarship and European colonialism (Ahmed 1992; Shohat and Stam 1994). And, additionally, this 'victimized Muslim women' is anchored and connected to 'the idea of the Muslim man as a violent terrorist' (Hirji 2005: 3). These constructed stories and images erase the history and politics of Afghanistan, including Afghan women's resistance against the Taliban and other fundamentalist and imperialist forces, including the USA and the USSR.

By evoking 'cultural difference' and by characterizing the history of Afghanistan as one troubled through its association with Islam, terrorism and/or communism, the USA narrates itself as a civilized protector and

savior of women and children rather than as an imperialist invader seeking power and control. Hirji finds that in the US media, the USA is primarily 'lauded for its efforts to ameliorate Afghan problems' and thus 'is seen as the vehicle through which Afghan women have been emancipated' (Hirji 2005: 9). The government, again supported for the most part by mainstream media, offered similar justifications in the 1991 Gulf War (Moghissi 1999). The rhetorical move in the fall of 2001—from a focus on terrorism as a reason to invade Afghanistan to a focus on the Taliban's (and by symbolic connection the terrorists') treatment of women—was not questioned in the media. As Abu-Lughod (2002: 784) writes:

What is striking ... is that there was a consistent resort to the cultural, as if knowing something about women and Islam or the meaning of a religious ritual would help one understand the tragic attack on New York's World Trade Center and the US Pentagon ... the question is why knowing about the 'culture' of the region, and particularly its religious beliefs and treatment of women, was more urgent than exploring the history of the development of repressive regimes in the region and the US role in this history ... Instead of questions that might lead to the exploration of global interconnections, we were offered ones that worked to artificially divide the world into separate spheres—recreating an imaginative geography of West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which First Ladies give speeches versus others where women shuffle around silently in *burqa*.

The colonialist move is precisely in the turn from history and politics to ahistorical constructions of culture and gender. Rather than addressing the roots of terrorism in global geopolitical power politics, the US public's interest is drawn to the treatment of women through an Orientalist lens that equates Islam with fundamentalism with the oppression of women with terrorism. In addition, the emancipation of women is primarily configured in terms of consumerism and individual rights, rather than in terms of the conditions of women's lives arising from the devastation of war, poverty, landmines, rape and massive displacements and migrations out of Afghanistan.

## THE FMF'S SYNCHRONICITY WITH US IMPERIALISM

Rather than critiquing the Bush administration's cynical appropriation of gender inequality to justify its 'war on terrorism', the Feminist Majority Foundation *welcomed* the post-9/11 focus on the Taliban's gender segregation and punitive restrictions on women's lives. In fact, the feminist rhetoric espoused by the Bush administration is widely perceived as *evidence* of the FMF's ongoing 'successful' efforts to end 'gender apartheid' (Brown 2002). The tragedy of 9/11 provided a powerful platform for their 'Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan'. Eleanor Smeal, Executive Director of the FMF, presented extensive testimony to Congress in October of 2001 about



the FMF's campaign and the significant role of feminism in bringing the world's attention to the Taliban's 'gender apartheid'. Smeal emphasized the important and heroic role that the FMF might have in working with the USA to restore women's human rights by eliminating the Taliban, instituting a democratic government, providing emergency humanitarian assistance and helping to rebuild the economy and infrastructure of Afghanistan. Smeal argued that for any of this to be successful that Afghan women must be involved at all levels of government and civil society (Feminist Daily News Wire 2001). While these are seemingly laudable efforts, they re-affirm US world hegemony, including imperialist feminism, without accountability. The FMF establishes itself as the leading feminist voice in the USA for the women in Afghanistan with the power and the authority to provide the feminist basis for US policy. In this way, the FMF re-affirms the ideas that the USA is in a position to judge gender *inequality* in Afghanistan with a consistent and persistent assumption that 'we' in the US embrace and practice gender equality and women's human rights. Further, the FMF presents its feminist framework as a *universal* one resonant with the US government and the majority of the people in the US. Thus, the FMF's campaign uncritically aligns itself with US foreign policy and affirms its rhetoric of spreading 'democracy' and 'freedom' in Afghanistan. In these ways, the FMF's efforts are indistinguishable from US hegemonic interests in the 'war on terrorism' despite their counter-hegemonic feminist intents. This synchronicity is evident in the political analysis and approach offered by the Feminist Majority.

The FMF initiated its 'Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid' in early 1997, within a year after the Taliban came into power in Afghanistan. The Campaign, in coalition with other women's and human rights organizations in the USA and in Afghanistan, was quite successful in the late 1990s in making visible and public the particular gender-segregated conditions of women's lives in Afghanistan. This visibility was due in no small part to the enlistment of Mavis and Jay Leno, a Hollywood celebrity couple, who helped to make the issue newsworthy. Mavis Leno became the Chair of the FMF Campaign to which she and her husband contributed \$100,000. Through their participation, the Campaign was able to bring national attention to what the FMF defined as *the* major problem facing women in Afghanistan – 'gender apartheid'. The Campaign successfully mobilized many women in the USA by situating their analysis within the context of Hollywood, celebrity and popular culture – cultural spaces seemingly untainted by political and social analysis. For instance, Mavis Leno in writing to 'Dear Abby' about the segregated conditions of women's lives, including the forced wearing of the *burqa*, was able to generate 45,000 calls and letters of concern from around the country (Dear Abby 1999).

The campaign galvanized the public to attend rallies, to distribute and sign thousands of petitions and to raise money for women in Afghanistan in response to the construction of women's oppression in Afghanistan, defined as 'gender apartheid', outside of any historical and political context. The

FMF enlisted the support of feminist and human rights organizations. Through their collective efforts, they were influential in keeping the USA and the UN from recognizing the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, in preventing UNOCAL's construction of a gas and oil pipeline across Afghanistan, and in raising funds to support Afghan refugee women in Pakistan and to support the awareness campaign (Gallagher 2000/1).

The success of the Feminist Majority Foundation's Campaign to bring the public's attention to gender apartheid and to influence public policy is due in part to the narrow and very particular set of images and stories told about the Taliban's brutal and punitive imposition of 'gender apartheid' as a defining feature of women's lives. The campaign was compelling in part because it did not challenge the public's worldview that the USA is superior in its practice of gender equality and its self-image as a benevolent 'savior' of victimized women and children of the 'third world'. The campaign resonated with the colonial and imperial discourse used against Islamic societies from the nineteenth century to the 1990s Gulf War (Ahmed 1992; Shaheen 1997). These include the ideas that 'Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies' (Ahmed 1992: 151–2). This discourse about Islam rests on the implicit assumption that the 'West' is superior in its respect for women. This assumption stands outside of the FMF's own historical and political location and reality in the USA given, for instance, endemic interpersonal and state violence directed disproportionately against women, widespread social and economic inequalities based in gender, race and class, increasingly limited sexual reproductive rights and freedoms in the USA connected to a rise in Christian fundamentalism, etc. The FMF does not include these related USA-based issues in their framing of gender issues in Afghanistan.

The connection between FMF literature, imperialist discourse, and the 'war on terrorism' is evidenced by their extensive and myopic focus on the *burqa* and 'gender apartheid' to symbolize women's oppression. The FMF argues that the 'system of gender apartheid' puts women 'into a state of virtual house arrest. Under Taliban rule, women have been stripped of their visibility, voice, and mobility' (Feminist Majority 2005a). In 1998, for instance, the FMF reports:

The Taliban has decreed that women and girls can no longer attend school; women are banned from employment; women are not allowed to leave their homes unless accompanied by a husband, father, brother, or son; women who do leave their homes have to be covered from head to toe in a '*burqa*', with only a mesh opening to see and breathe through; the windows of homes with women occupants are required to be painted opaque so the women inside cannot be seen; women are prohibited from being treated by male doctors; and women are banned from wearing white socks and shoes that make noise as they walk.

(Feminist Daily News Wire 1998a)

The FMF campaign broadly publicized the Taliban's severe punishments meted out to those who did not follow the policy of gender segregation and veiling; Mavis Leno, for instance, told a broad audience: 'Women are being beaten, shot at, and even killed for violating these draconian decrees—for merely trying to go to work, leaving their homes alone, or violating the Taliban's extreme dress orders' (Feminist Daily News Wire 1998a). The campaign spread the word among the US public by telling the painful stories that demonstrated the rules of segregation and their consequences on women's lives in Afghanistan. The stories provided the basis for the public 'horror' which translated into public support for the campaign to end 'gender apartheid'. While the stories were true, they were told outside of their historical and political context, a context that would have complicated the public's understanding of the roots of the Taliban's rise to power. The story told in the FMF campaign is not unlike that told by the Bush administration in its justification for war. By offering little political analysis of the rise of the Taliban and fundamentalist movements, it constructs the Taliban as simply an 'evil' force that must be annihilated.

#### THE RELEVANCE OF HISTORY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The FMF's ahistorical focus on the Taliban's gender segregation leaves out the complex set of geopolitical, economic and social forces shaping the lives of women and men prior to and during the Taliban's regime. Their description of the Taliban's rise to power makes it appear as if it evolved out of nowhere and without resistance. In most of the FMF literature, the following paragraph is the extent of the FMF's description of historical context:

On September 27, 1996, the extremist Taliban militia seized control of Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, and violently plunged Afghanistan into a brutal state of gender apartheid in which women and girls have been stripped of their most basic human rights.

(Feminist Majority 2005b)

The Campaign constructs pre-Taliban Afghanistan as a society with gender equality at its base; for example, the following statement is typical of how pre-Taliban Afghanistan is presented: 'Until two years ago, women in Kabul were 50% of the university students, 70% of teachers, and 40% of the doctors' (Feminist Daily News Wire 1998b). In this narrative, the frame of formal equality represented by the percentage of women in education and employment becomes a defining element of gender justice.

This historical narrative erases the historical context and social conditions of women's lives in contemporary Afghanistan. The FMF literature does not focus on the impact of the 20-year civil war on women's lives and its ties to

the geopolitics of the US Cold War strategy against the USSR. There is minimal reference to the brutal occupation of the USSR of the 1980s and the involvement of the USA in fighting that occupation. The FMF campaign does not spend much time on the USA alliance with the anti-Soviet Mujahidin fundamentalist resistance movements that are directly connected to the rise of the Taliban. The USA provided billions of dollars of weapons and military training to these extremist groups who followed these distorted versions of Islam; the US considered these groups to be 'Cold War warriors—freedom fighters against communism' (Gallagher 2000/1: 369–70) and thus provided their full support. The FMF campaign does not address how the USA continued to supply arms to these groups as the civil war continued into the 1990s. From 1992–6, some of these Mujahidin forces gathered together under the Northern Alliance and took over Kabul in an effort to establish control. The Northern Alliance was brutal in its treatment of Afghan people; as Kolhatkar reports, 'an estimated 45,000 civilians were killed in Kabul alone during that period' (Kolhatkar 2002b: 17). They were responsible for the widespread rape, abduction and murder of women. The FMF's construction of pre-Taliban Afghanistan makes no mention of these horrific realities.

In general, the FMF campaign fails to discuss the devastating impact of all of these political conflicts on the lives of Afghan women, men and children. In striking contrast to the FMF portrait of pre-Taliban Afghanistan, for instance, Wali, Gould and Fitzgerald (1999) report that women in Afghanistan were undergoing a multitude of war-related traumas, including massive displacement (creating millions of refugees), rape, abduction, forced prostitution, poverty, extremely high maternal mortality rates, unequal access to resources, etc. Many of the civilian deaths were related to the fact that Afghanistan is one of the most landmined countries in the world as reported by the International Committee for the Red Cross (Wali, Gould and Fitzgerald 1999). While Wali, Gould and Fitzgerald focus on the human rights violations against women perpetrated by the Taliban, they place the Taliban in a broader political context:

The health and human rights crisis in Afghanistan was brought about by the Cold War between superpowers ... In this context, it is imperative that the gender apartheid policies and practices of the Taliban and the current level of violence against Afghan women be linked to the larger geopolitical decisions made at the start of this conflict. In particular, it must be fully recognized that the United States' support for the most radical elements of Islamic fundamentalism throughout the 1980s slowly brought about the destruction of the cultural framework that defined and maintained the time-honored role of Afghan women.

(Wali, Gould and Fitzgerald 1999)

By not incorporating this history into its campaign, the FMF constructs the USA as a neutral and benevolent bystander. The US is not presented as a responsible party for the development and empowerment of these fundamentalist

movements. Instead, the FMF contributes to the social and historical amnesia that is so intricately tied to US hegemonic power and its affirmation within the USA, including its own positionality. The FMF campaign acts as if it exists and operates outside of these geopolitical interests. In part, the campaign's success rests on this ahistorical approach that does not challenge the public to think critically about how these gender issues are connected to the complex relationship between the USA and Afghanistan.

In the immediate post-9/11 aftermath, Eleanor Smeal, in her testimony before Congress, does acknowledge the US role in the rise of the Taliban to underline her insistence that 'We cannot allow history to repeat itself' (Smeal 2001). However, she continues to assume that 'we' have a legitimate and righteous role in determining the future of Afghanistan and that 'we' can indeed be the 'savior' and take up our call to 'restore human rights' and bring 'democracy and freedom' to Afghanistan. The FMF campaign supported military intervention as a method of ending the Taliban's 'gender apartheid'. When the USA helps to institute Karzai in power, a leader who is directly connected to the Northern Alliance, the group known for pervasive rape and murder of women, the Feminist Majority offers no commentary. Instead, the FMF tends to affirm the Bush administration's initial invasion and overthrow as appropriate for enacting change in Afghanistan. The FMF lauds the success of the war in terms quite similar to the Bush administration by noting women's liberation from the Taliban's 'draconian decrees' and by reporting on the women in the streets without *burqas* and unaccompanied by male relatives (Feminist Majority 2005b).

At the same time, the FMF does report on the deteriorating situation of women in Afghanistan in order to critically address the failures of the Bush administration in living up to its promises of securing democracy and peace in Afghanistan. For instance, in 2003, the FMF reported that 'girls' schools are under attack, regional warlords are able to impose Taliban-like restrictions, people who speak out for women's rights and human rights receive threats, and many women still wear the burqa out of fear' (Feminist Daily News Wire 2003a). Their campaign now seeks 'to increase and monitor the provision of emergency and reconstruction assistance to women and girls' and to 'urge the expansion of peace-keeping forces' (Feminist Daily News Wire 2003b).

While these are important demands given the current role of the USA, the FMF continues to define the failures of the Bush administration primarily as narrowly-defined 'security' issues. It continues to operate with no recognition of the impact of US bombing and militarism on the daily lives of the people in Afghanistan. The thousands of civilian casualties, the Afghan prison abuse reports, the role of US soldiers in the rape of women in Afghanistan, etc., are all absent from the Feminist Majority press releases, news reports and campaign materials and are thus not considered by FMF as part of women's human rights. Without this explicit recognition there is no accountability. Instead, the FMF campaign continues to present the USA as a benevolent and omniscient 'helper' of women and girls in Afghanistan.

## ORIENTALISM AS FRAME FOR THE FMF CAMPAIGN

The lack of context in the FMF's literature reaffirms and contributes to an Orientalist approach to the women in Afghanistan during the Taliban's regime. For one, it begs the question that Hirschkind and Mahmood ask: 'Why were conditions of war, militarization, and starvation considered to be less injurious to women than the lack of education, employment, and, most notably, in the media campaign, Western dress styles?' (2002: 345). It is not that the descriptions of the Taliban's restrictions and punishments were untrue; it was important to bring to light the human rights violations being perpetrated. However, the story provided is told as if it was occurring in a vacuum, outside of history and solely related to Islam and Afghan culture.

Rather than critically interrogating the mainstream US perspective on women in Afghanistan, the FMF campaign contributes to a cultural context that has been saturated with controlling and Orientalist images of Arabs and Muslims that construct them in terms of terrorism and the oppression of women. For instance, Shaheen reports on a 1994 survey of 3000 people in the USA about intergroup relations that found that 42 per cent agreed with the statement that 'Muslims belong to a religion that condones or supports terrorism', 47 per cent concurred with the assertion that Muslims 'are anti-Western and anti-American' and 62 per cent agreed with the declaration that Muslims 'segregate and suppress women' (Shaheen 1997: 3). US news and popular culture have a century of narratives and images that distinctively mark Arab and Muslim people as 'Other'. As Shaheen writes: 'For more than a century . . . the unkempt Arab has appeared as an uncivilized character, the cultural Other, someone who appears and acts differently than the white Western protagonist'; Arab Muslims, he argues, have been 'projected as religious fanatics', and as people who threaten 'American' 'freedom, economy, and culture' (Shaheen 1997: 12, 15). There is then, a symbiotic relationship between the mainstream news and popular culture images of Arab and Muslim women and men, the history of US foreign policy and the FMF's campaign against the Taliban in the late 1990s. The FMF's campaign reproduces these stereotypes as a method of galvanizing public support in the US. It seems quite possible that had they not drawn upon and reinforced this Orientalism, they would not have been as readily successful in gaining such widespread interest in the cause.

Along these lines, the FMF Campaign operates with a binary opposition in which the Taliban, Islam, terrorism and fundamentalism exist on one side of a divide and the USA, Judeo-Christianity, democracy, equality and freedom exist on the other side. This dichotomous construction fuels an Orientalism that, as Nayak (2006) suggests:

... enables the simplistic division of the world into the Orient, or the hotbed of terrorism, ignorance, poverty, oppression, racism and misogyny and the US-led West, or the savior, beacon of light and teacher of democracy and equality *par excellence*. The Orient is coded as Islamic fundamentalist; the West,

although laden with Christian fundamentalist rhetoric and assumptions, is coded as naturally and universally right and good.

(Nayak 2006: 46)

Islam is reduced to 'a monolithic culture governed by religious barbarism' (Stabile and Kumar 2005: 771) and is conflated with fundamentalism and terrorism. The term 'fundamentalism' is almost exclusively reserved for Islamic societies. Ahmed-Ghosh writes, 'for the West, fundamentalism is not just about states that are not secular, liberal, and individualistic but also those that are Islamic' (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003: 8). The FMF campaign participates in this conflation by consistently referring to the Taliban as 'Islamic fundamentalist' or as 'Islamic extremists' or as 'Islamic fundamentalist terrorists'. This is deeply problematic in its implications for contributing to the 'war on terrorism' which has consistently targeted Arab and Muslim peoples, groups and nations; it is essential in this context to distinguish fundamentalism from Islam in the context of the Taliban's human rights violations of women. As Ahmed-Ghosh argues, fundamentalism 'is a political movement' while Islam is 'an individual and social belief system . . . Women in Afghanistan hate the Afghan fundamentalists, not Islam' (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003: 9).

While the FMF campaign literature mentions that the Taliban's rules are not endorsed by Islam as a religion (e.g. 'the Taliban's gender apartheid decrees are foreign to the religion, the culture, and the people of Afghanistan . . .' [Feminist Majority 2005a]), the continual use of the term Islam with terrorism and fundamentalism in the same sentence produces the opposite effect. Nayak further suggests that 'the very need to make such statements while remaining silent on other religions, or on the history of collaboration between the USA and extremist Islamic regimes, actually ensures that Arab/Muslims will be demonized and automatically suspicious' (Nayak 2006: 52). The term fundamentalism in FMF literature rarely applies to any other religious movements, including Christian movements in or outside of the USA. This is particularly of note given that the FMF has a major focus on the violence against abortion providers in the USA orchestrated by fundamentalist Christianity.

## THE *BURQA* AS SYMBOLIC CENTER OF THE FMF CAMPAIGN

Given the significant Orientalist lack of attention to the historical and political context, I now further examine the myopic focus on the issues of the *burqa* and 'gender apartheid', which reinforces this entrenched US imperialist logic with regard to the need for US control and direction over Muslim and Arab societies. In this way, the FMF campaign's construction of the Taliban's mistreatment of women is indistinguishable from the one being promulgated by the hegemonic mainstream media and culture. The FMF campaign, similar to the mainstream media, consistently and extensively uses the *burqa* as the symbol of women's oppression under the Taliban (Kensinger 2003: 7). The image of a woman covered by the *burqa* provides a visual metaphor for

the system of 'gender apartheid' that the campaign sought to dismantle and serves as a 'stand in for all of the other violence done to Afghan women' (Ayotte and Husain 2005: 115). The power of the image is connected to its historical basis in European colonialism. As Ahmed (1992: 152) explains:

Veiling – to Western eyes, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies – became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam's degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam, and it became the open target of colonial attacks and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies.

In the FMF campaign, and in the media's response to 9/11, the veiled woman became a spectacle of 'otherness' as well as 'backwardness', and the image stood in contrast to the so-called 'freedom' of fashion here. Eleanor Smeal, for instance, describes the *burqa* as 'a prison – a poisonous shroud that can cause or aggravate respiratory conditions and loss of vision – both of which can cause death' (Feminist Daily News Wire 1998c). The FMF encouraged women in the US to wear a 'swatch of mesh' which was to be symbolic of 'the obstructed view of the world for an entire nation of women who were once free'. Smeal explains: 'We are asking everyone to wear it in remembrance so that we do not forget the women and girls of Afghanistan until they are free once again' (Feminist Daily News Wire 1998c). As noted by Franks (2003: 147), the appeal to 'remembrance' made it seem as if the women were 'already extinct'. The passivity and powerlessness of women is amplified and the erasure of history, politics and Afghan women's resistance is sealed. Moreover, the question of freedom's return begs the question of 'the freedom to which they are to return once again' – does it refer to the state of civil war and the brutal oppression of the Northern Alliance in the early 1990s? To the time of the Soviet occupation of the 1980s? What would constitute Afghan women's 'freedom' and from whose perspective?

Kolhatkar questions the politics of focusing on the *burqa* to the exclusion of most other issues facing women. She writes:

Whose purpose does this serve? How 'effective' would the Feminist Majority's campaign be if they made it known that Afghan women were actively fighting back and simply needed money and moral support, not instructions? We might just gather that Afghan women are perfectly capable of helping themselves, if only our governments would stop arming and empowering the violent sections of their society.

(Kolhatkar 2002a: 34)

Sima Wali confirms this critique of the focus on the veil in an interview in *Ms Magazine* in 2000, noting: 'It's not the *burqa* but the politics behind our problems that has kept Afghan women isolated and dehumanized' (quoted in Kensinger 2003: 10).



Not all efforts aimed at making public the atrocities of the Taliban regime had the same singular focus on the *burqa*. The FMF's campaign's visual focus on the *burqa* is quite different from that of the Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan (RAWA), an organization formed in the 1970s. RAWA actively sought to bring international attention to the abuses of the Taliban soon after the Taliban gained power in Afghanistan, including the forced imposition of the *burqa* and exclusion of women from the public sphere; however, its approach is quite different. With respect to the *burqa* in particular, RAWA presents the struggle against the Taliban 'within a larger political struggle and history', including the role of US imperialist and militarist intervention in Afghanistan's history (Kensinger 2003: 8). Throughout their web site (RAWA 2006), one learns about women's consistent resistance to the Taliban and to all fundamentalist and imperialist forces, including the USA and the USSR. The web site photos include women with varying types of veiling, all appearing with captions describing women's lives and activities; thus, the women are subjects rather than objects of politics and history. As Kensinger (2003) points out, by providing a broader historical, political and cultural context of the multitude of ways women's lives were being restricted as well as the ways women were resisting, RAWA expands the meanings associated with these images. For instance, the image of a veiled woman in Afghanistan might 'in fact be an image of a woman veiling her resistance; perhaps she is using the cover provided by the chadari to hide school books, the camera she used to record Taliban abuses, her use of lipstick, or her identity as she flees persecution' (Kensinger 2003: 7).

The monolithic and Orientalist feminist critique of the veil – common in the USA – contributes to a context wherein discrimination against Muslim women who practice forms of veiling in a multitude of ways within the USA, remains invisible (Banks 2001; Benet 2001; Shah 2002). The right to practice veiling is rarely discussed within mainstream feminism as a personal, political and/or religious choice. This is significant given the political context in the USA where the harassment of Muslim women escalated with the war on terrorism and the US Patriot Acts I and II legitimated racial profiling, detention and 'disappearance' of over 1,000 Muslims, Arabs and South Asians. These actions coincided with an increase in hate crimes and harassment, including the targeting of women wearing the veil (American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee 2002). Muslim and Arab women, especially those engaged in some practice of veiling, have been singled out for harassment and violence, though they are often invisible in the discussion of racial profiling and hate crimes. Women have had the *hijab* pulled off their heads and lit on fire, faced insults, intimidation, threats of violence, and they have been physically attacked (Benet 2001). The FMF campaign has been silent with regard to this discriminatory violence in the USA. Thus the right to practice veiling is not visible as an issue, and the harassment of Muslim women in the USA for their choice to wear the veil does not jettison the assumption of 'freedom of choice' in the USA. The FMF campaign, seemingly disconnected from

Muslim communities, by equating the veil with oppression, rather than looking at the varied meanings of the veil connected to specific contexts and purposes, does not see the discriminatory violence against women who practice veiling (see Khan 2001). The next section demonstrates that the Orientalist and imperialist underpinnings of the obsessive focus on 'gender apartheid' and the veil and the accompanying neglect of history, context and other forms of violence, *allow* the FMF to 'succeed' at 'saving Others' and to therefore succeed at asserting its hegemonic position.

## THE PROBLEM OF 'SAVING'

The FMF, like the Bush administration, constructs an image of Afghan women as poor, vulnerable and victimized (namely by 'gender apartheid') and thus in need of being 'saved'; in contrast, the Feminist Majority Campaign places itself, in tandem with the US government, in the powerful position of being the 'savior' of Afghan women. The FMF's campaign narrative is one of colonialist protection rather than of solidarity. Protectionist discourse is one where the so-called West saves 'third world' women and offers them the opportunity to follow the 'West' in its version of 'gender equality', 'democracy' and 'freedom'. This discourse simultaneously evades any accountability on the part of the USA for the roots of the interlocking systems of oppression impacting Afghanistan, including patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism and imperialism. The 'West' is uncritically assumed to embody 'equality', 'democracy' and 'freedom' despite its serious involvement and investment in these same systems of oppression and power. The FMF Campaign capitalizes on the images of prominent white Western women, like Mavis Leno, Eleanor Smeal and other women politicians and celebrity figures, who construct themselves as 'free' and 'liberated' and thus in the best position to 'save' Afghan women. As Mohanty points out, images of third world women are constructed by way of contrast to Western women who are presented 'as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions' (Mohanty 1991: 56). In the case of Afghanistan, Western women leaders become the imperial do-gooders in a position to rescue Afghan women from the Taliban's rule and Muslim Afghan men more generally.

In a speech to Congress soon after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Smeal confirms the alignment of the campaign with Western imperialism in her statement:

In removing the Taliban, the US and its allies must rescue and liberate women and children, who have suffered so terribly under the Taliban's rule ... The link between the liberation of Afghan women and girls from the terrorist Taliban militia and the preservation of democracy and freedom worldwide has never been clearer.

(Feminist Daily News Wire 2001).

This argument is firmly embedded in the rhetoric of manifest destiny and colonial conquest so prevalent in the nineteenth century. As Rosenberg argues:

Striving to save women and children from the grasp of barbaric, premodern men, and then to uplift them, is a familiar theme to historians, though it seems that generations of Americans have repetitively advanced it as a fresh and unique testimony to their own special enlightenment.

(Rosenberg 2002, quoted in Dubriwny 2005: 100).

The use of 'women and children' as an ideograph, Rosenberg argues, supports 'visions essential to rallying wartime nationalism and to presenting citizens with a sense of their nation's special benevolence' (Dubriwny 2005: 100).

The heroic role is substantiated by marginalizing the individual and collective resistance of Afghan women and by highlighting the US feminists responsible for securing their liberation. For example, in the Spring 2002 issue of *Ms*, the FMF includes an insert into the magazine entitled 'A Coalition of Hope' which documents and celebrates the victories of its campaign in Afghanistan (Brown 2002). The article mostly highlights the actions of the white US leaders of the Feminist Majority's campaign against the Taliban; absent are the names, voices and actions of the many Afghan women in Afghanistan who have individually and collectively resisted the Taliban and other fundamentalist regimes for years, including the work of RAWA. The few Afghan women activists mentioned in the article are those associated with the government, including the Northern Alliance, supported by the Bush administration. A US supporter of RAWA, Elizabeth Miller, in an 'Open Letter to *Ms Magazine*', criticizes the article for leaving out the history of grassroots women's resistance and struggle for equality and democracy in Afghanistan (Miller 2002). This history is well documented elsewhere (RAWA 2006; Brodsky 2003).

The prior relationship of the FMF with RAWA before the post 9/11 'war on terrorism' is erased in this new version of the FMF's campaign. It seems that since the women of RAWA reject the 'rescue mission' of the USA given the history of prior militaristic and imperialist interventions, they are no longer included in the FMF's project nor its 'success' story. RAWA is outspoken in their condemnation of the US bombing campaigns against Afghanistan and of US militarism as a solution to gender inequality. They were immediate in their rejection of the legitimacy of the post-invasion rule of the US supported Northern Alliance given its 'campaign of mass rape and murder' of women in the early 1990s as well as today. The Feminist Majority, who owns *Ms Magazine*, on the other hand, firmly aligns itself with the US government's 'war on terrorism' in the 'Coalition of Hope' article. It highlights the relationship established between the Feminist Majority and the US State Department as a successful and significant one in relation to 'saving' the women in Afghanistan. Ultimately, then, the feminist interests of the FMF are aligned with the US hegemonic state, rather than with Afghan feminists critically mobilized

against US militarism and imperialism which are central to the dire situation facing the women of Afghanistan.

The resulting break in solidarity between the FMF and RAWA bespeaks earlier failures of international feminism in the early twentieth century. As Weber writes:

Despite their sympathy for and occasional identification with their Middle Eastern sisters, Western feminists never regarded them as equals. Certain of their own comparative freedom, they neglected the opportunity to reevaluate their own oppression . . . their unwavering conviction that they had nothing to learn from (and everything to teach) Middle Eastern women blinded Western feminists to the possibility of alternate bases for, and expressions of, feminism in cultures unlike their own. Thus, by reassuring Western women that perhaps they did not have it so bad after all, feminist Orientalism not only forestalled the development of a more radical critique of Western patriarchy but prevented an expanded definition of feminism as well.

(Weber 2001: 151–2)

Weber raises several significant points relevant in critically analyzing the FMF's campaign against 'gender apartheid'. As Franks suggests, 'the rigid assertion of Western cultural and moral superiority insulates countries such as America against self-critique in a way that is both dangerous and hypocritical' (2003: 136). She suggests, in contrast, an analysis that compares the constructions of 'women' in both Afghanistan and the USA – constructions that obscure the realities of women's lives. She writes: 'In both Afghanistan and in the United States the fantasy of women reigns supreme; a constructed and artificial femininity is everywhere on display while the facts of violence and exploitation remain hidden' (Franks 2003: 150). As part of this landscape, one might contrast, as well, the politically expedient interest in the women in Afghanistan with the apathy and/or hostility of the USA government to significant social and economic issues within the US.

Given the ideological and political position of US feminists within US empire, it is critical to deconstruct the myth of the 'liberated woman of the West' so implicit in mainstream discourse and to challenge its use in bolstering imperialist forces.<sup>3</sup> This reification is not an isolated phenomenon, as it has been nurtured by years of research on 'other' women, where white US and/or European women are presented as models of a liberated womanhood in contrast to the 'third world woman' (Mohanty 1991). In this regard, it is important to understand how images of white Western women's bodies are used for nationalist/imperialist purposes, at the same time that women's issues are being marginalized, minimized and distorted within the USA. In dismantling the image of the 'liberated West', feminists might analogize the Taliban's fundamentalism to Christian fundamentalism and repressive state forces in this country that perpetuate interpersonal, group and state gendered violence

