

***Bring Me Men: Military Masculinity and the Benign Façade of American Empire, 1898–2001.* By Aaron Belkin. West Sussex: Columbia University Press. 2012. 244 pp. \$25.00 paper.**

doi:10.1017/S1743923X12000591

Laura Sjoberg
University of Florida

Bring Me Men starts with the thesis that “military masculinity is not what it seems to be” and sets out to complicate inherited ideas and analyses of American military masculinities through feminist lenses. From cover to cover, this book is a careful, complex, theoretically innovative, and empirically rich explication of a new understanding of American military masculinity. Defining military masculinity fairly conventionally — as “a set of beliefs, practices and attributes that can enable individuals — men and women — to claim authority on the basis of affirmative relationships with the military or with military ideas”, (p. 3) Belkin goes on to reject the conventional understanding of American military masculinity as “requiring warriors to disavow, and even crush, any unmasculine aspects of themselves” (p. 4). Instead, Belkin argues, “the production of masculine warriors has required those who embody masculinity to enter into intimate relationships with femininity, queerness, and other unmasculine foils, not just to disavow them” (p. 4).

Realizing this contradiction leads Belkin to retheorize militarized masculinity in the American context between the Spanish-American War and the eve of the “Global War on Terror,” arguing that the masculine armed forces require a surprising degree of engagement with the unmasculine others. *Bring Me Men* demonstrates and analyzes these contradictions in two two-chapter case studies with an impressive amount of detail and depth. Chapters 3 and 4 deal with questions of penetrability and impenetrability regarding questions of rape in the U.S. military, focusing specifically on the United States Naval Academy rape investigations in 2000. Chapters 5 and 6 explore significations of filth and cleanliness in the Philippines, starting in 1898 with the beginning of the United States military presence. Belkin argues that these dichotomies of penetration/impenetrability and filth/cleanliness are not opposites where American militarized masculinity chooses one and abhors the other. Instead, he demonstrates that one cannot understand the progression of American

militarized masculinity (or *American-ness* more generally) without seeing that militarized masculinity relies on a combination of these apparent opposites.

In Belkin's view, this realization is important not only because it suggests the necessity of radical retheorizing of militarized masculinities, but also because it maps onto American empire. Belkin explains that "military masculinity's capacity for camouflaging and containing imperial contradictions has depended on an alignment in which the normativity of an individual soldier's masculinity had been equated with the normativity of the military-as-organization and American empire" (p. 43). In other words, militarized masculinities are a site at which "the contradictions of American empire have been smoothed over" (p. 43) and need to be recognized in order to articulate not only a full critique of gender bias in militarization, but also of American empire as a whole.

This book is as theoretically sophisticated (drawing on the work of Butler, Foucault, Connell, and Doty heavily) as it is accessible to readers even outside of the academic study of gender and the military. It is as well-researched (including a number of personal interviews with key personnel) as it is shocking to people who continue to resist the idea that gender, sexuality, and militarism are intrinsically interlinked. The book makes an important contribution to the literature and does so with impressive methodological skill and writing acumen. I would consider it a necessary addition to the lists of students and scholars of gender and war, as well as of militarism and security more generally.

If there are criticisms to be had of this book, then they are mostly minor stylistic quibbles. In several passages (especially those describing evidence from the United States Naval Academy), the author is uncomfortably centric in his own accounts of what happened, who was investigated, and why. While the author is to be applauded for being a scholar-activist and pursuit of social justice is much of the motivation for feminist and gender scholarship to begin with, some of the references come across as a bit celebratory for the subject matter of the book. At the same time, perhaps contradictorily, several times the book stops just short of seriously engaging the normative implications of its understandings of the contradictions in militarized masculinities specifically and American empire generally. Because of this tension, I would push the author to "flesh out" both the place of the researcher in the research and the normative importance of the work and its findings.

The conclusion of the book hints at the latter, as the author contends that American militarized masculinity "is a site where Americans lie to

themselves about the suffering they inflict,” which “supports scapegoating at home and imperialism abroad,” revealing “America at its worst” (p. 185). It “is a straightjacket that constricts what it means to be free” individually and collectively (p. 182). Belkin suggests that this means that militaries generally and militarized masculinities specifically are a place “where the U.S. fails to live up to its highest democratic potential” (p. 185), a concluding sentence that oddly leaves one hanging after a book that was riveting from beginning to (almost) end. What is “democratic potential”? How is this picture of American militarized masculinity somehow antidemocratic? Why do we assume that fulfillment of “democratic potential” is itself positive (and gender-neutral) as a goal? At the end of the book, what is the reader supposed to think of the U.S. military? And how is the reader supposed to look to change it? This excellent book would be even stronger if it concluded by seriously engaging these questions.

Laura Sjoberg is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Florida, Gainesville, FL: sjoberg@ufl.edu