

**Damsel-in-Distress or G.I. Jane?:
Gender, Race, and the Liberation of Private Lynch**

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Abstract:

In the spring of 2003, the U.S. invasion of Iraq encountered a setback when a convoy was ambushed after taking a wrong turn. Eleven soldiers died and six were taken prisoner, including Private Jessica Lynch, a young white woman from West Virginia, and Private Shoshanna Johnson, a young African-American woman from Texas. The capture of these women, and the death of a third, Private Lori Piestawa, a Native American woman from Arizona, brought American ambivalence regarding women in combat to the fore, and thus posed a potentially significant threat to home front support for the war. This paper scrutinizes the narratives employed by mainstream media to resolve this ambivalence and to reinforce the narratives of retaliatory and violent masculinity, in contrast with vulnerable and pristine femininity, which helped sustain the war effort. By combining the insights of feminist theories of intersectionality with work from American politics on issue framing, we demonstrate how these narratives relied not just on gender stereotypes for their power, but were also significantly affected by race. These narratives framed Lynch as a pretty but plucky damsel-in-distress, whose widely publicized rescue provided American viewers with a crowd-pleasing finish. Johnson, though also wounded in the ambush, was not welcomed home with college scholarships, a million dollar book deal, and a made-for-TV movie of her story. We explore this discrepancy, the gendered and racialized narratives which enabled it, and the continuing impact of these narratives on public attitudes toward women in combat.

Introduction: Three Women, Three Races, One War

Last spring, during the United States' controversial invasion into Iraq, ten American soldiers were captured as Prisoners of War (POWs), and hundreds more were killed in battle. This paper explores what happened when America learned the stories of three soldiers in particular, all women (one white, one African American, and one Native American), and all members of the 507th Maintenance Company, a supply convoy which was ambushed in southern Iraq on Sunday, March 23. The paths of these three women diverged during the ambush, when Lori Piestewa became the first American woman to be killed in the Iraq War, and the first woman Native American soldier ever to die in service of the United States. Shoshanna Johnson, African American, was taken captive along with four comrades; they were rescued by U.S. forces three weeks later. Jessica Lynch, white, was also taken as a Prisoner of War, but for some reason was separated from the others and held in an Iraqi hospital until being rescued nine days later on April 1.

In this paper, we examine how the stories of these three women laid bare American ambivalence toward women's place in the military, posing a potentially significant threat to public support for the war effort. Specifically, we detail the media-crafted narratives which served to diffuse the tension of this ambivalence and to buttress normative notions of war as a masculine enterprise, thus garnering increased public approval of the U.S. invasion. The main contribution of this paper is to bring feminist theories of intersectionality into conversation with American politics work on issue framing. This conversation reveals that the media narratives constructed in order to diffuse the normative tensions of the POW crisis pivoted not on notions

of gender alone, but on the intersecting identities between gender and race (as well as class). These narratives framed Lynch in turn as a damsel in distress, a pretty but plucky gal, and finally as a domestic bride to be. Such frames were not crafted as cleanly for Shoshanna Johnson; indeed, she received relatively sparse media attention in comparison with Lynch. Though also wounded in the ambush, Johnson, unlike Lynch, was not awarded college scholarships, a million dollar book contract, and her own made for TV movie. We explore this discrepancy, the gendered and racialized narratives which enabled it, and the impact of these narratives on public attitudes toward women in combat.

G.I. Joe and G.I. Jane: Masculinity, Race, and War

Readers and television viewers who followed news reports of the ten American POWs captured in Iraq in the spring of 2003 might have noticed that one soldier in particular received more news coverage than any of the others. According to a Lexis Nexus search of major U.S. newspapers, 1,087 articles were written in March and April on all nine of the other POWs combined, while in the same time period almost exactly the same number (a full 1,047 articles) were written on Private First Class Jessica Lynch alone. Table 1 shows that these counts are consistent with coverage by *The New York Times* (which served as the source for more detailed content coding performed for this project) as well as by *The Guardian*, a left-leaning British newspaper (demonstrating that the fascination with Jessica Lynch was not unique to the U.S.).

Table 1: News Coverage (in Number of Articles) in March and April, 2003

Prisoner of War	<i>New York Times</i>	All Major Papers	<i>The Guardian</i>
Lori Piastewa (KIA)	7	105	3
Jessica Lynch	86	1,047	32
Shoshana Johnson	7	221	2
Edgar Hernandez	8	129	3
Joseph Hudson	7	169	6

Patrick Miller	7	138	4
James Riley	11	176	3
David Williams	8	139	3
Ronald Young	5	149	3

A main reason for the discrepancy in news coverage illustrated in Table 1 may have been the unusual circumstances surrounding Private Lynch's captivity and eventual rescue. By all accounts, the hospital raid to rescue her was a compelling scene, especially as captured on grainy, green-night-vision-tinted video by U.S. military personnel. Also intriguing is the story of exactly how the U.S. came to learn where Private Lynch was being held. An Iraqi lawyer, Mohammed Odel Al Rehaief, had seen Private Lynch while visiting his wife, who worked as a nurse in the hospital. At great personal risk to himself and his family, Al Rehaief sought out U.S. armed forces to give them detailed information regarding Private Lynch's location. Maybe it would be fair to say that any American POW rescued under these circumstances would have received a greater amount of media attention than those POWs whose stories were not augmented by the selfless humanity of an Iraqi local or the captivating images of video feed. Maybe. But we cannot ignore the other elements intrinsic to Private Lynch's story, elements absent from the story of every other POW: she is both white, and female.

The argument that the disproportionate news coverage devoted to Private Lynch's experiences was a result only of the interesting circumstances surrounding her internment and rescue, and not at all a product of her unique gender/race profile, falls short for two main reasons. First, if this argument were true, then we would expect to see nothing in the reporting of Private Lynch's experiences that would not reasonably have appeared in a description of any other POW in the same situation. That is to say, in order for us to discredit the notion that the compelling factor of Private Lynch's story was not her circumstances, but her gender and race, we would need to be able to substitute any other gender/race elements into the voluminous

descriptions of Private Lynch which appeared in the spring of 2003, and still be able to keep a straight face. But imagine a news story about a male American soldier (or even a female soldier of racial minority), and try these descriptions on for size: “Iraqi doctors were enchanted by this blonde warrior,” (Kristoff, June 20, 2003) or “[he] held up a hand and grabbed the Ranger doctor’s hand, and held onto it for the entire time, and said ‘Please don’t let anybody leave me,’” (AP, April 5, 2003) or better still, “[he] was cowering in fear under a bed sheet” (Blair, April 6, 2003).

Of course, to observe that these statements sound out of place, that there’s simply no way we would ever see these descriptions printed about a male soldier, is a claim not readily disproven. Still... these statements do sound out of place, and it seems highly unlikely that similar phrases would ever be used to describe a male soldier. As one male political science colleague commented upon reading these quotations, “if I were a soldier and a newspaper published a comment like that about me, I’d sue them for slander.”¹ It doesn’t take statistical analysis to tell us that, in our society, the only time a news story would refer to a male U.S. soldier as “cowering in fear under a bed sheet” would be if the journalist meant to illustrate that soldier’s cowardice. And it is doubtful, especially during a period of heightened national pride like that experienced in the spring of 2003, that the several journalists who described Private Lynch “cowering in fear under a bed sheet” were doing so in a conscious attempt to condemn her as a coward. The truth is, news about a woman “cowering in fear under a bed sheet” just isn’t news; that kind of language and narrative is used to describe females so commonly that we hardly bat an eyelash at it.

The second main reason we cannot accept this argument, namely that as many news stories were devoted to Private Lynch alone as to all the other POWs combined only because of

¹ Conversation with Kyle Joyce, 2/25/04.

the unique circumstances surrounding her rescue, is that we know something about gender. Even before turning to academic work from women's studies, we know experientially, historically, that in American culture individuals of different genders and different races are perceived, described, and treated differently. We also know, in particular, that American culture takes issue with women in the military, and that there is every reason to think that the issue it takes with white women in the military may be qualitatively different from the issue it takes with service women who are racial minorities. There is no doubt that society is currently nurturing an understanding of militarism that resides almost exclusively within the domain of masculinity. As Regina Titunik writes, "the military establishment, more than any other institution, is based on and derives its identity from the idea of masculinity" (2000: 24). Simply put, our idea of "soldier" and our idea of "woman" are incongruous. What is more, they are incommensurate; we lack even the ability to measure their normative distance from one another or chart a path toward their alignment.

The lack of a common unit within the intersection between "woman" and "soldier" stems in part from the strong role language plays in developing notions of gender boundaries. Take, for example, the following comment made on April 4, 2003 by Col. Wallace Hobson, chief of staff at Fort Bliss: "I believe George Orwell summed it up best when he stated, 'We sleep soundly in our beds because rough men stand ready in the night to visit violence on those who would do us harm'" (Shanker, April 4, 2003). While reading this quotation, even before we have a chance to make an academic assessment of which phrases might be reinforcing gender categorizations, our experience with the culture of binary divisions translates the message for us loud and clear: soldiers are men.

What is more, soldiers are white. The race of the “rough men” described in the quotation above might not be explicitly clear, but our experiences with history and American culture leave us little doubt about the ideal soldier’s color of skin. We need only look to the strong social resistance which mounted when Harry Truman desegregated the military in 1948 to remember that while white soldiers can be heroes, black soldiers are, at best, a source of brute strength. Consider, for example, the language used in a 1945 memo appointing a special board to study the role of blacks in the military, a board which later made recommendations favorable toward integration. The Gillem Board, named after chairman of the board Lt. General Alvan C. Gillem, Jr., was charged with the duty of preparing “a policy for the use of authorized Negro manpower potential during the postwar period including the complete development of the means required to derive the maximum efficiency from the full authorized manpower of the nation in the event of a national emergency” (MacGregor, 1981: 153). Although racial attitudes in America have advanced considerably over the past five decades, the predominant image of “soldier” remains white, and male; G.I. Joe.

Yet Americans saw images of soldiers last spring which bore little likeness to G.I. Joe. Shoshanna Johnson, Jessica Lynch, and Lori Piestewa presented the public with an idea of “soldier” that did not match the dominant image. Confronted with this dilemma, the public had two options: either evolve its notions of gender and race to accommodate the reality of women soldiers (both white and non-white), or find a way to transform the situation so that its normative ideas could be preserved. Accustomed to going to great lengths in order to avoid expanding its social attitudes, the media (with the public and Bush administration directly in stride)² did indeed

² The next step of this project will be to analyze official communication from the Bush administration regarding the POWs last spring to discern whether issue framing was employed in that arena.

find a way to reshape its predicament, thereby defending America's normative understanding of gender and race.

In order to understand exactly what happened in this reshaping process and why it was necessary in the first place, we turn first to feminist theory and the insights it offers regarding gender, race, class, and the intersections between them. Next, we employ work on issue framing from the American politics literature to examine the precise way in which this reshaping occurred. In this case, issue framing was used to transfigure the stories of three women in order to diffuse the danger they posed to society's ideas of gender, race and class. To explore this process, we parse the chronology of news coverage on the POWs last spring into three main narrative threads that were woven around Jessica Lynch in particular. The shifting narrative frames of "the stolen bride," "the feisty little lady," and "the bride-to-be," all of which were attached to Jessica Lynch like paper doll clothes in turn, served as balms for the nation's focused ambivalence.

Gender, Race, and Intersectionality Theory

Feminist political theory has given detailed and fitting consideration to the "self" vs. "other" binary divisions that often serve as the pillars of identity construction. These binary divisions separate such components as male from female, white from black, and rich from poor. Although this process of categorization activates tensions between the divided groups, these tensions can be temporarily allayed when one group asserts its dominance over the other, extracting the "self" from the "other" in a process Patricia Hill Collins calls "objectification," wherein the dominant group (the "self") objectifies the minority group (the "other") (2000). It is important to note that the majority status of the "self" relies on the existence of the "other," a

lesser entity which can never truly belong. That is to say, it is only through the exclusion of the “other” that the “self” obtains its internally formed and externally buttressed accolades of inclusion; in this binary world, belonging demands a point of reference.

Collins suggests that Western thought has been largely responsible for the binary categorizations which have led to so much discord and resulting violence throughout the world. Western thought, she says, is ingrained with the need to obtain control over chaos, urging us to order the world into a controllable form. Indeed, the process of differentiating the “self” from the “other” is a powerful one, not only in terms of the comfort of belonging bestowed on the majority, but also in terms of the ignorance and cruelty which fuel the process. As Jane Flax remarks, hate is a potent force, linking people together with bonds that run deeper even than conscious awareness (1998).

Society is bifurcated through each of the separate lenses of constructed social identity (gender, race, class, and others), but when these lenses are overlaid their categorizations are multiplied. The resulting intersections of normative divisions house complexities beyond the sum of their parts. Thus, for example, the experience of being a black woman cannot be approximated by adding together the characteristics of what it is to be a woman in a male-dominated society and what it is to be black in a white-dominated society. As Kimberle Williams Crenshaw writes, “when the [feminist and antiracist] practices expound identity as ‘woman’ *or* ‘person of color’ as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling” [emphasis in original] (1994). And when the categorizations of gender and race are multiplied by the divisions of class, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexuality, and so on, more specific intersections are produced of even greater complexity.

These hierarchical categorizations gain even greater power when solidified through the words and rhetoric which feed culture. Through what Patricia Hill Collins calls “controlling images,” hierarchies become seemingly rooted and immovable. Controlling images label black women, for example, as “mammies,” “welfare mothers,” and “jezebels.” As Collins writes, “controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable” (2000: 69). Even when the social conditions which had originated the controlling images no longer apply, these images turn out to be stubbornly steadfast. The reason controlling images maintain such a persistent grip, Collins tells us, is that not only do they act to suppress the “other” in each binary division within the realms of gender, race, class, etc., but they also play a vital role in sustaining intersecting oppressions. Thus it is that for Collins, black women, in their reiterated status at the “other,” become the baseline excluded group by which all other intersecting identities define their normality (2000).

Perhaps the most crucial piece of Collins’ work, however, is her insight that while controlling images may *appear* to be natural, in fact they are not so. Many feminist scholars highlight this point, holding it aloft as a metaphorical light at the end of the identity construction tunnel. As Kimberle Williams Crenshaw notes, the foundational binary divisions within gender, race, and class (which in turn converge to produce more complex intersections of identity) are inherently unbalanced.³ The unstable nature of the social constructions of gender, race, and class, makes these dichotomous categorizations susceptible to change over time (1994). For example, with specific regard to the binary gender categorization in society’s notions of

³ Moreover, a finer-grained examination of the distinction between gender and sex yields the conclusion that categorizations of sex are unbalanced in the same way as those of gender. As Jane Flax notes, “gender and sex are mutually formed, unstable, conflicting” (1998).

militarization, we see that time can alter the normative image of a soldier. In her article about gender divisions in military culture, Regina Titunik reminds us that war has not always been associated exclusively with masculinity. The first wave of guardians in Plato's *Republic* had equal places for women and men, and indeed the training of these guardians combined "courage with gentleness" (2000).

Thus, despite extensive social efforts to partition gender, race, and class, the boundaries of the resulting binary categories bleed into one another, shifting continuously in increments that are mostly minute, but occasionally monumental. Sometimes these shifts result in transformations we would label progressive and enlightened. In other instances, such as the change from Plato's way of viewing the role of gender in armed forces to our current perspective, we might view the transition as deterioration rather than evolution. In any case, changes in the foundational binary divisions of gender, race, and class produce changes also in their multiplied intersections.

More important even than the fact that society's ideas of the binary divisions of gender and race (for example) can change over time is the fact that such changes do not rely on accident, good luck, or cosmic nudging. Human beings come equipped with all the power necessary to destabilize categories of oppression. In fact, patriarchal divisions are not the status quo, but rather painstaking, artificial constructions that require constant reinforcement. As Cynthia Enloe reminds us:

...you have to ask about the daily operations of both masculinity and femininity in relationship to each other. It is not men-on-top that makes something patriarchal... It's never automatic; it's rarely self-perpetuating. It takes daily tending. It takes decisions – even if those are masked as 'tradition.' It relies on many women finding patriarchal relationships comfortable, sometimes rewarding (2003).

Our task, then, is not to make sense of an irreversible hijacking of language by the majority, but to understand the precise way in which language is currently used to reinforce notions of patriarchy *and how language could be used differently* to unhinge those notions.

Issue Framing: What It Is and Why It Works

To reiterate, the normative dilemma many Americans faced last spring stemmed from the tensions which arose when the binary categories of masculinity and femininity merged in the forms of Shoshanna Johnson, Jessica Lynch, and Lori Piestewa, tensions which were exacerbated by the further complexities of intersections between gender, race, and class. As discussed in the previous section, feminist theory literature provides insights into exactly *why* these three women posed such a threat to society's understanding of identity. To understand exactly *how* the threat was handled, that is, how the tensions between identity constructions were diffused, we turn to the American politics literature on issue framing.

Thomas Nelson defines issue framing as “the process by which a communication source constructs and defines a social or political issue for its audience” (1997: X). The underlying assumption of issue framing is that all issues are inherently multidimensional, and thus able to be presented in multiple ways. Issue framing occurs when an issue is presented in a particular light, highlighting one or a few of its dimensions to the neglect of the others. Attention can often shift from one dimension of an issue to another dramatically, and indeed there may be no way to predict when a shift in issue framing will occur. What is more, dramatic shifts in issue framing often produce long-lasting policy consequences (see, for example, Baumgartner and Jones, 1993).

The whole point of issue framing is usually not the framing itself, but rather the response the framing is intended to elicit. When a fast food chain releases a series of advertisements emphasizing the close community connections it facilitates or a political candidate presents himself as an underdog turned comeback champion, these frames are intended to inspire a particular reaction on behalf of the audience (in these cases, consumers and the electorate, respectively). When the audience, or a portion of the audience, responds to issue framing, it does not usually mean that people have changed their minds about the issue. Instead, when issue framing focuses priority on a particular aspect of an issue, people arrange the many opinions that correspond with the multiple dimensions of that issue accordingly (see, for example, Nelson et al. 1997 and Nelson and Oxley 1999). For example, although a voter might not agree on a candidate's defense spending platform, the voter may decide to support that candidate when prompted to consider the candidate's virtues as an underdog turned champion, a characterization with which the voter, perhaps a strong union member, may identify.

In short, issue framing is all around us. And although one of the most challenging aspects of studying issue framing is its intangible nature (it is difficult to define or methodize), the fact that framing is a phenomenon common in human society allows our collection of personal experiences to serve as a litmus test as sorts. When a politician puts a spin on a scandal or a toothpaste commercial advertises its company as playing an essential role in saving the environment, an official rubric is unnecessary; we know framing when we see it.

And we have seen it used extensively to codify hierarchical constructions of identity, particularly in the realms of gender and race. The American politics literature offers some valuable empirical analyses of the ways in which the patriarchal understanding of the male/female dichotomy has been bolstered by media framing. Nayda Terkildsen and Frauke

Schnell, for example, describe how the media has framed the feminist movement in five different ways over time. Their study uses an experimental setting to demonstrate that these different frames have different and significant impacts on subject attitudes toward gender equality and women's rights (1997). Yet no American politics studies have yet incorporated theories of intersectionality within a study of issue framing. We hope to invite these two literatures into dialogue with one another, and we believe the resulting discussion will yield even more insights than could be discovered within the two literatures separately.

For although feminist theory does not employ the term “issue framing” explicitly, there is no doubt that the concept plays a central role in the literature.⁴ Both Kimberle Crenshaw Williams and Jane Flax detail the ways in which black women in particular have been framed as “bad women” and “non-innocents.” Being labeled as a non-innocent is significant, of course, because non-innocents cannot be the subjects of non-innocent actions committed by other non-innocents. That is to say, non-innocents cannot be violated, or victimized. In fact, Flax notes that until recently, “the language of rape did not even apply to black/females, who were believed to be oversexed” (1998: 13 and 53). Williams offers a particularly disturbing account, originally noted by Valerie Smith, of how the “Central Park” jogger rape received extensive news coverage, whereas numerous other rapes which occurred in New York during the same period (28 cases of first-degree rape or attempted rape were reported in New York the same week) received little to no media attention. Many of the other rape victims were women of color, many of whom experienced brutalities at least as horrifying as the case of the Central Park occurrence,

⁴ Patricia Hill Collins addresses the phenomenon of framing precisely, although not by name, when she speaks of the power of controlling images. She provides clear illustration of the different ways in which black women have been framed in society, each frame serving to subjugate the intersectional position in which black women reside (2000). Similarly, Nancy Fraser discusses something akin to framing in her exploration of how stigmatizing images have been used to frame social-welfare issues (1989). The second author's work on the use of imagery and narratives within and against the welfare movement adds further insight to the role issue framing can play in feminist discourse (Sparks 1999).

in which the victim was white. The discrepancy in news attention would in this case, as in the case of media coverage of the POWs last spring, imply, as Williams says, “a sexual hierarchy in operation that holds certain female bodies in higher regard than others” (1994: 368). In the case of the Central Park rape, the media used careful language and rhetoric to frame the event in distinctly racist terms, casting the black rapists as “savages,” “wolves,” and “beasts.” As Smith says, these news reports “shaped the discourse around the event in ways that inflamed pervasive fears about black men” (1990: 368).

What the American politics literature would call framing has also been employed in portraying the role of women in the armed forces. In examining women’s changing roles in the military over time, Lorry Fenner observes that women’s position in the military have been framed in various ways since the very formation of the United States. After World War II, for example, issue framing was employed to present women’s involvement in military service as the personnel was constrained to fit within traditional notions of femininity, heterosexuality, and morality. In Operation Desert Storm (1990-1991), although female soldiers were killed and captured as Prisoners of War, women’s position in the military was framed as being restricted to non-combat positions. Media coverage of this war highlighted camouflage-dressed mommies hugging their babies goodbye. Sexual activities between male and female soldiers were also sensationalized, and inflated pregnancy rates were reported. Thus, this method of framing worked to diffuse normative threat of female soldiers not by downplaying women’s role as being temporary or non-militarized (as was the case after World War II), but instead by undercutting the image of the women themselves, portraying them as sexually loose camp followers and as unfit mothers, thereby removing the need to reconcile militarization with society’s understanding of innocent, unblemished femininity.

The Capture and the Crisis, and Issue Framing to the Rescue

By the spring of 2003, it might have been anticipated that America was growing accustomed to the notion of women soldiers. Yet American sentiments regarding women in the military remained divided and strong. As one reporter wrote in April, “Women are barred from about 30 percent of active-duty positions, and there's still a deep emotional resistance to exposing American women to deadly violence... the sight of a female P.O.W. on television sent a frisson down the American spine, and there is such discomfort with women in body bags that maybe it can't be countered with practical arguments” (Kristoff, April 25, 2003).

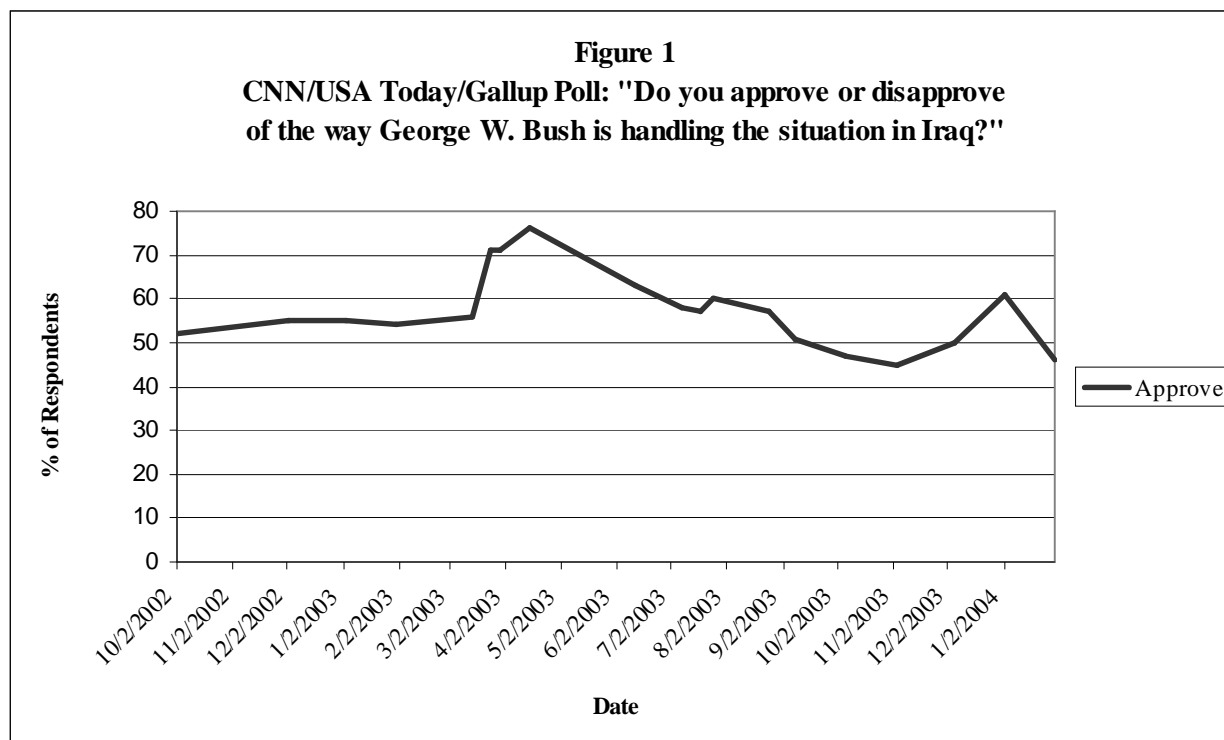
In truth, the reports on March 23, 2003 that female soldiers had been captured in Iraq – that is, that a white female soldier had been captured – sent a shockwave through U.S. society. The very presence of women in the military posed a threat to our dominant of notions of gender by embodying the masculine identity of a soldier in a form that, because of its femininity, is effectively cordoned off from our understanding of the male domain (which holds jurisdiction over concepts such as professional success, financial independence, and political savvy, in addition to militarization). This threat was heightened, of course, in the form of Jessica Lynch. On the one hand, Private Lynch was a disciplined unit of American military force. On the other hand, she was petite and pretty, with blonde hair, blue eyes, and a former “Miss Congeniality” title; all of the above hang from her image in the media like satin bows.

When images of Lynch’s cheerful young face were broadcast across the country, threatening our normative understanding of gender identity, the threat was also a political one. If the results of the Lynch rescue had been slightly different, as the easily could have been, public approval for the U.S. invasion in Iraq could have plummeted. In short, the POW crisis last

spring created a political crisis for the Bush administration, undoubtedly worried already that the initial adrenaline rush ingeniously provided by connecting the public directly with the action via embedded reporters would not continue indefinitely. The way in which Jessica Lynch's story was framed (dependent in part on the fact that the other two women in parallel situations but of different races received relatively minor public attention), acted not only to protect hierarchical notions of gender, but also to bolster public support for the controversial war effort.

While a CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup poll taken on March 14 showed a 56% approval rating for President Bush's handling of the situation in Iraq, the same poll taken 10 days later on March 24 found that approval had spiked to 71% (see Figure 1).⁵ What happened in between these two dates? On March 23, six soldiers in the 507th Maintenance Company were captured (including Jessica Lynch). In other words, the Bush administration's response to the POW crisis (as framed by both the administration itself and the media) raised the President's approval ratings to 71% even before Lynch was rescued. After the rescues of all the POWs, the approval ratings jumped even higher, to 76% as of April 14. Although public opinion was responding to multiple stimuli during this period of time, the extensive news coverage on the captured POWs, and Jessica Lynch in particular, supports the conclusion that these stories had a direct and significant impact on public support for the war effort.

⁵ Public opinion trends over this period of time were very similar in response to the question "Do you think the U.S. made the right decision or the wrong decision in using military force against Iraq?" (Pew Research Center).



At first glance, the theory that public approval of President Bush's actions in Iraq increased upon hearing that six U.S. soldiers were captured might seem counterintuitive. Wouldn't Americans disapprove of a President who had allowed six soldiers (especially blonde haired, blue eyed, 18-year-old Jessica Lynch) to be taken as Prisoners of War? The answer to this question demonstrates the power of issue framing. Presented with the circumstances of the ambush on the 507th Maintenance Company, the media (along with the Bush administration and the public) had a choice regarding how it would perceive and portray the situation. A narrative could have been crafted that held President Bush accountable for putting our troops in harm's way, that held up the capture of six American soldiers (especially young Jessica Lynch) as evidence that U.S. forces should never have invaded Iraq in the first place. If the media had propelled this story, it is likely that public support for President Bush and the war effort would have declined. But this was not the narrative that was constructed.

Instead, the capture of the six POWs was framed as a call to arms. Public attention turned not to President Bush, but to the dangerous Iraqis, and the vulnerability of our soldiers; in particular, Jessica Lynch. Relatively few news stories were devoted to the male POWs, Shoshanna Johnson, or Lori Piestewa, but stories about Jessica Lynch abounded. In the space of a few days, she became a poster-child, an icon, a household name. At a pivotal point in the U.S. invasion, the images of and narratives about Jessica Lynch that were constructed served to unite the nation and channel our fears. By focusing its attention and fears on Jessica Lynch in particular, society found an outlet for its grief and a source of inspiration for feelings of vengeance, and thus for renewed war efforts. The service Jessica Lynch performed for America was not only that of a courageous soldier, but also that of justification for the war (particularly for the Bush administration), and this last service, like the first, was of immeasurable value.

The narratives created to portray Jessica Lynch's experiences served to solidify hierarchical notions of identity, notions which bifurcate male from female, white from black, rich from poor (not to mention Christian from Muslim/Arabic), and the weight of which is compounded on intersectional identities. It is therefore important to examine these narratives not only as a matter of academic interest, but also as a potentially fruitful example of how language can be employed to perpetuate oppressive divisions of gender, race, and class. Toward this aim, we examined in detail the content of every *New York Times* article published on any of the ten POWs captured in Iraq last spring, as well as those written about Lori Piestewa, the Native American woman killed in action.

The fact that Jessica Lynch, the only white female U.S. soldier captured in Iraq last spring, received significantly more media attention than any of the other POWs is unsurprising. Also unsurprising is the observation that much of the content of this media attention was both

gendered and raced. Three questions are worthy of further consideration. First, how were images of gender and race used in portraying Private Lynch in a distinct light from her compatriots? Specifically, what role did language play, and how was this language wielded to craft the idea of Pvt. Lynch in particular ways? Second, what were the implications, both practical and theoretical, of the way in which gender and race were used to craft a media image of Pvt. Lynch? This second question gives way to the third: Is there a way out of the linguistic and theoretical ensnarement Crenshaw points us toward in any situation like that of Pvt. Lynch and her comrades, where language is wielded as a double-edged sword to solidify hierarchical portrayals of gender and race?

The next sections trace the narratives woven around Jessica Lynch as they developed into three distinct ways of framing her: *The Stolen Bride*, *The Feisty Little Lady*, and *The Bride-To-Be*. In each section, we detail the ways in which issue framing generally, and controlling images in particular, were used to develop the frame in question. By examining these narratives, we may gain insight into the nature of the normative notions of identity which compelled their construction.

The Stolen Bride

At the beginning of her ordeal, before her safety had been confirmed, Lynch was portrayed largely in terms of her looks, her sweetness, how terrible it would be if something would happen to her, and thus how important it was to get her back. News reports were filled with mentions of her physical features (blonde hair, blue eyes, and slight frame), as well as references to her femininity (such as the fact that she sent a note to her former kindergarten teacher from the desert of Kuwait “set out on pastel paper in a schoolgirl's round handwriting”

(Douglas and Blair, April 3, 2003) and the genuine quality of her character (including an observation that although “winning top prize [at the State Fair] would have implied the easy road, instead Lynch received her [Miss Congeniality] award for politeness and grit”) (Lipsky, December 4, 2003). In addition, Lynch’s young age (18) was mentioned in nearly every story.

Reports also focused on the lower-class struggles of the Lynch family, and the fact that Jessica Lynch had become a soldier specifically “because of the lack of opportunities in this tiny impoverished community where the unemployment rate of 15 percent was the highest in the state; Lynch saw the Army as a means to pay for a college education that would allow her to teach in an elementary school” (Jehl and Davey, April 2, 2003). Reporters depicted the letters Lynch sent home to her friends and family from Iraq as being written “with the wonder and awe of a country girl who had not visited Charleston, the state capital, until she graduated from high school but had now embarked on what she plainly saw as a great adventure” (Jehl and Blair, April 3, 2003). Even friends described Lynch as “nothing but a wholesome West Virginia country girl,” and her mother said later that “it just tore us apart to think of how scared she was over there” (Jehl and Blair, April 3, 2003). In these quotations we see that, interestingly, Lynch’s lower-class status, while positioning her in the normative role of the excluded “other,” served to make her plight all the more compelling to the public. Overall, her prettiness, sweetness, and the naivete of her humble upbringing combined to frame Lynch as being as pure and innocent as a virgin bride.

But perhaps of greatest importance was the fact that media coverage riveted upon detailed descriptions of the military ambush, including some speculations regarding the fate of the Americans captured (focusing on Lynch most of all). Combined with the rhetoric used to describe her appearance and character, these dramatic reports framed Lynch as attractive,

desirable, helpless, and in grave danger; a damsel in distress. Not only did she embody the purity of a virgin bride, but much worse, she symbolized a bride who had been stolen. As Alessandra Stanley wrote on April 18, 2003, “her youth, delicate good looks and blond hair also evoked older, more disturbing myths; in the hands of Saddam Hussein's troops, this fragile 19-year-old supply clerk... turned instantly into a Fay Wray struggling in the paws of King Kong” (Stanley, April 18, 2003).

Although media attention to the possibility of the female POWs being raped was less extensive than one might have feared, it was nonetheless a prominent force in framing these women’s stories as being distinct a, and that of Jessica Lynch in particular.⁶ The, for example, Presidential Press Secretary Ari Fleischer was asked the following question:

Ari, one of the U.S. POWs in Iraq is Shoshana Johnson of Texas, while The New York Times this morning reports that Pfc. Jessica Lynch of West Virginia is missing or captured. And during Desert Storm, Maj. Rhonda Cornum was captured and gang-raped, while the other U.S. female prisoner of war would neither confirm or deny that she, too, was gang-raped. And my question, does the president think that the Iraqi army has somehow changed to avoid the raping of female prisoners? Or does he believe that it would be wise to keep the women out of combat areas?⁷

Ari Fleischer replied as follows:

The history of our military is that men and women have served this nation honorably and with distinction. The treatment of prisoners by Saddam Hussein is the only point worth mentioning here. It's a given that men and women serve our country with dignity, that Saddam Hussein's regime had better not harm our prisoners. The president has made that clear. ... Lester, no follow-up.⁸

⁶ We should note that, in contrast with the seemingly unceasing media speculations about whether Melissa Rathbun-Nealy (a female POW in Desert Storm), who denied this slander to no avail, relatively few *New York Times* reports “fantasized” about the possibility of Lynch being raped or, after return, the probability that she was raped. Dare we hope that the apparent absence of media obsession on the idea of Lynch being raped indicates a lessening of the grip the protector/protected myth has on American culture. Perhaps. But it is also important to remember that *The New York Times*, as a newspaper of distinctive quality and general propriety, is perhaps not indicative of the more varied media coverage on Jessica Lynch the average American was exposed to last spring through TV news, internet news flashes, and tabloid reports. Although content analysis on these broader media sources was not performed as part of this project, informal observations of the media coverage last spring suggest that the threat of Jessica Lynch being sexually abused was a key element, if an unspoken one, in the portrayal of her story. America was, generally speaking, acutely aware of her sexuality and the danger inherent in it.

⁷ Question asked and reported by World Net Daily at White House Press Briefing, March 25, 2003.

⁸ Response by Presidential Press Secretary Ari Fleischer to question asked by World Net Daily at White House Press Briefing, March 25, 2003.

This exchange illustrates the two main elements which fuel the stolen bride narrative: our damsel is in distress, and they “better not harm” her.

It is important to note that although Shoshanna Johnson is mentioned in this exchange, in general the stolen bride framing did not extend to her, not only because the media simply did not give as much attention to her story, but also, presumably, because of her race. In her intersectional position as a black woman, Johnson does not fit the stolen bride imagery, characterized as worthy, innocent (sexually innocent in particular), and swathed by no accident in a pristine white gown. As Kimberle Williams Crenshaw says, “The strength of the appeal to ‘protect our women’ must be its race and class specificity” (1994: 363).

The framing of Lynch in particular as a white and pure stolen bride falls directly in synch with one of the most pervasive myths of andocentric Western culture: the idea that man is the protector and woman, the protected. After a man “claims” a woman as his, it is his *duty* to protect her as a weaker being, unable to protect herself. More importantly, it is his *right* to protect her as his property. For both these reasons, this mythology prescribes that if a man’s woman is stolen, he must retrieve her. It was perhaps this first sense of duty conveyed to the American public through the construction of Lynch as the stolen bride that benefited the Bush administration the most by rallying the nation around the war effort. As Patricia Hill Collins states, each term in a binary relationship (black/white, male/female, protector/protected) “gains meaning only in *relation* to its counterpart” (2000: 70). With Lynch as a vulnerable entity who needed protecting, the nation was conveniently re-inspired in its role as protector. Downtrodden Iraqis had served this purpose well, as had normal American citizens under threat of terrorist attacks. But Lynch, framed as a single poster child evoked a heightened sense of protectiveness within the American community. As Nantais and Lee observe, the protector/protected

dichotomy “facilitate(s) the functioning of the military during times of both war and peace. The protector... relies upon the image of the protected as motivation” (1999: 182). Painting the myth of the stolen bride bought the Bush administration more time, rallying the country around the duty it now had to bring its woman home.

Yet the *right* the mythical husband has under the protector/protected myth to retrieve his stolen bride plays an equally important role as his *duty* to do so. This importance may be best articulated through examination of the story which serves as the archetype of a husband enacting his *right* to reclaim his stolen bride: the story of Helen of Troy and the massive military assault launched on her behalf. Crucial to a full appreciation of this story is remembering that the men who went to Troy to fight on her behalf did not do so because they felt spontaneously compelled to defend her rare beauty, as retellings of the myth often imply. In his *Iliad*, Homer is explicit in stating that the men who formed the core units of the Greek assault did so because of a formal contract they had made with each other years before when gathered as potential suitors for Helen. Under this contract, each man agreed that regardless of who was lucky enough to become Helen’s husband, if any man should ever steal her away it would fall on the rest of her former suitors to go and rescue her, returning her to her rightful husband. Thus, when the Greeks assemble at Agamemnon’s home in Mycenae to prepare their assault on Troy, they are there under Greek law.

The point is that Helen’s rescue was not the product of love, or even sexual lust. It was not the result of fear over her fate or what “those men” might do to her. It was the exacting of an agreement, made between men, made to ensure the protection of property; an insurance policy. Under the protected/protector myth, the need to retrieve stolen property is absolute. No matter how “valuable” the property is within itself, or how “valuable” it/she was within the man’s home

realm, if that property is stolen by another man its value skyrockets. The need this mythical man feels to retrieve/reclaim his stolen bride is put in high contrast when considering the extreme threat of rape. As Nantais and Lee describe Seifert's argument,

Rape is a 'final symbolic expression of the humiliation of the male opponent.' It is a blatant message that the men responsible are not able to protect 'their' women. This suggests that in war, rape has little to do with the female victim; its importance and effectiveness derive from its threat to male potency (1999: 183).

Thus, the broadcasting of Lynch as a stolen bride served also to fuel our culture's sense of possessiveness, dominance, and right to property.

The Feisty Little Lady

The second narrative frame used to reconstruct Lynch's identity stemmed from the description printed in *The Washington Post* that Lynch shot several Iraqi soldiers during the firefight which ensued after her convoy's ambush. It was reported that she "...sustained multiple gunshot wounds while firing to her last round" and that she was "...fighting to the death..." Although these reports were later found to be inaccurate, the image of Lynch as a feisty little Annie Oakley or even a buff G.I. Jane was too much for the media, or the public, to resist. Indeed, framed as a strong, independent woman who could hold her own, Lynch became an inspiration to many. Consider the following editorial submitted to the *New York Times* by a female senior airman in the Airforce:

Those who have been arguing that women are incapable of fighting in combat are surely eating their words today. Who could have imagined that the unlikely hero of this war would be a beautiful female warrior? Pfc. Jessica Lynch was willing to fight to the death rather than be captured, shooting several Iraqis even after being shot herself. Was there ever any doubt? Move over, boys, there's a new hero in the house! (Editorial, April 4, 2003)

Numerous stories referred to Lynch as "brave" and "a hero," offering quotes in the same tone from individuals such as Air Force Captain Shean Galvin, who said of Lynch that "She

must be as hard as nails.”⁹ If these reports were presented in isolation, their tenor may have served to paint Lynch’s identity in bright shades of strength, resourcefulness, competency, and courage. She would have been portrayed as having power and agency, independent of the men who rescued her from Iraq and independent of the men who sent her to Iraq in the first place.¹⁰

Yet these images of Lynch were tempered and twisted by counter images and conflicting tones, often within the same news reports which hailed her courage and strength. These counter images were nebulous and elusive, yet nonetheless pervasive and influential. Examples of these counter images can be found in between the lines of those stories which gave accounts of Lynch’s statements regarding even the most mundane of items or situations, as when a news source felt it notable to report that when Major Gen. Kiley welcomed her to Walter Reed, Lynch replied “I’m glad to be here, too, sir.” This comment, while pleasant, was not news worthy in content; it is doubtful that such a comment would be included in a report about a male Army private. Lynch’s comment was included because, although not substantively news worthy, in terms of its ability to frame her precisely as a spunky little lady the comment was well worth its print weight in gold. The media took delight in quoting Lynch’s minute comments, serving to construct an endearing yet stunted image of Lynch as the feisty little lady whose strong will would make her man proud at the carnival when she swings her wooden hammer down hard enough to ring the bell and win a stuffed camel, but whose will would always defer to his.

⁹ Quote taken from the April 4, 2003 Associated Press article, “Jessica in Good Spirits After Back Surgery”

¹⁰ It should be noted that there would still be troubling implications of portraying Lynch’s strength and competency without any provisions. An argument could be made, and we think a convincing one, that many men in the military perform acts of equal courage and resourcefulness, but these men are not rewarded with full-color magazine stories. To hold up Lynch’s actions, noble as they were, as something special, is to presume that we should not expect female military personnel to act with the same strength and integrity expected of male military personnel on a normal basis.

The Bride-To-Be

In later reports, Lynch was framed in yet a third way, exposing the self-contradictory nature of the preceding feisty little lady framing. While grand descriptions of Lynch's accomplishments in the ambush were still circulating, the American public was being eased into thinking of Lynch in the role of a daughter and, more importantly, as a fiancée. Having successfully provoked the little lady image, news coverage turned toward Lynch's home and domestic situation, focusing on the small details of her family life, her recovery, and her plans for the future. Particular attention was paid to her engagement to Army Sgt. Ruben Contreras, and photos of the happy couple were plentiful. Her parents and friends seemed to be interviewed even more than they had been before or in the days immediately following her rescue. Her father joked with reporters about the pink casts she would wear, and the story of her childhood was told in quaint detail again and again. Hawaii offered her a tropical paradise vacation, and two universities offered competing scholarship packages to enable Lynch to reach her dream of becoming an elementary school teacher. A \$1 million book contract completed the image.¹¹ These narrative threads intertwined to define a space of security and recovery that provided America with the comforting image that Lynch was safe and sound, secure in her place as daughter and bride to be.

The bride-to-be frame served three main functions. First, it continued the work initiated by the first two frames to diffuse the social tensions embodied by Lynch as a female soldier. Second, it validated the idea that a woman's place is in the home (thus advancing the normative values of conservative ideology). Finally, it propagated the benefits of collective abstraction (thereby downplaying the structural inequalities ingrained in the American system). Through

¹¹ *I Am a Soldier, Too: The Jessica Lynch Story* by Rick Bragg (in consultation with Jessica Lynch) was released in November, 2003.

this last function, the bride-to-be frame partook of the “American Dream narrative” outlined by Jane Flax. In this narrative, we are taught that our individual fates are the product of our inherent worth, independent of circumstance. As we rise towards success, we may transcend our beginnings, however unfortunate they may have been, by “stripping” off our particular histories to become abstract individuals, free from the particulars of race, class, and gender. Through the American Dream narrative, Clarence Thomas, a black man from a poor family, can become a Supreme Court Justice (1998: 15). Also through this narrative, Jessica Lynch, a woman from a blue-collar background, can obtain a college scholarship and a million dollar book deal. As one news story of a gathering of the Lynch family and friends reported, “others here said they were sure she had been saved by the power of prayer and by the resilience fostered by her modest West Virginia roots.”

The problem with the American Dream narrative, as Flax points out, is that the power of the abstract individual is derived directly from its disavowed “other.” Without the “other” in its objectified position, the abstract individual cannot function. With the “other” in its place, abstract individualism serves only to ignore and deny the structural inequalities that exist within the system, including racism and sexism (1998: 15). Through careful rhetoric and image framing, the American Dream narrative describes the hardships which an abstract individual has overcome as being far removed from the present success, as if things like poverty and racism were no longer problems in America at all. To what small extent these problems might still occur, they are described having external, independent causes, for which no one need take responsibility. In this way, the American Dream narrative tells the story of promise for the average American to rise above his or her circumstances (including race and gender) by shedding those experiences to achieve belonging.

In the case of Pvt. Lynch, the story of her capture and rescue were artfully reconstructed to fit within the framework of the American Dream narrative. Lynch's experiences were framed to combine suspense, action, and a happy ending together in a highly digestible media flurry perfect for Americans accustomed to an informational diet of short captions and glossy action shots. As several news journalists have pointed out, the "Saving Private Lynch" story was a hit, complete with all the components of a Hollywood summer blockbuster. In fact, as Deborah Orr put it, "if a Hollywood screenwriter had made it up, the critics would have roundly condemned the story as excruciatingly cheesy, hopelessly clichéd, and even offensively racist" (Orr, April 4, 2003). And indeed it was. As it turned out, the challenges to normative understandings of gender and race which Pvt. Lynch embodied were not insurmountable ones.

Liberating Private Lynch?

"It does [bother me] that they used me as a way to symbolize all this stuff. It's wrong...I don't know why they filmed it, or why they say the things they [say], you know. ... All I know was that I was in that hospital hurting. ... I needed help. I wanted out of there. It didn't matter to me if they would have come in shirts and [with] blank guns; it wouldn't have mattered to me. I wanted out of there." – Jessica Lynch¹²

Irony can be found in the fact that numerous *New York Times* articles, as well as stories published by other news agencies, took issue with the way in which Jessica Lynch's story was being framed in the media. Many journalists seemed appalled at the disparity between media attention paid to Lynch and to Shoshanna Johnson, at the way in which Lynch was held up as an icon of American patriotism, and at the multiple ways in which others were profiting from the media framing. One story scornfully reported that "A book agent from New York who has contacted the Lynch family but does not want to be named for competitive reasons, said: 'This has the makings of an amazing story that could not only make them rich, but make me rich.' The

¹² Taken from ABC News interview with Diane Sawyer, December 4, 2003.

‘symbolic importance of her rescue is not only an amazing story, but it single-handily turned around the mood of the war’” (Blair and Landler, April 5, 2003).

An acute awareness of the role of issue framing in the portrayal of Lynch’s story on the part of some or even most journalists, however, does nothing to negate the ramifications of that framing. The narratives used to frame Jessica Lynch were unnervingly successful in their efforts to buffer hierarchical notions of identity from the normative threat posed by the POW crisis. In particular, we have seen how these narratives were leveraged not just on gender, but on intersecting dimensions of gender, race, and class. Shoshanna Johnson, Lori Piestewa, and the eight male POWs captured last spring in Iraq were relegated to the public’s peripheral vision because none of these soldiers posed the same level of normative threat as embodied in Jessica Lynch (the men, because they are men, and the women, because they are “lesser” women). Jessica Lynch, on the other hand, received more media attention than she likely would have preferred. Her story was woven, and rewoven, until the threat she embodied to warrior masculinity was diffused, until the seemingly contrasting elements of her identity were reconciled through crafted narratives. These narratives inspired the nation, and the nation applauded, registering a jolt increase in public support for the Bush administration that nourished the war effort through its most controversial hour. And reading these narratives through the lens of feminist theories of intersectionality not only adds to our understanding of the extraordinary power of issue framing, but also suggests that finding ways to disrupt these narratives will be both a difficult and critical task.

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