

# Race, Gender, Nations, and Politics through Women's Bodies: *The Female Combatants* (1776)

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## ABSTRACT

Political cartoons have long been regarded as a significantly influential medium of media throughout the American Revolution. The subjects of these cartoons are often embodiments of political and racial stereotypes prevalent in Britain and America during the Revolution era. However, the role of feminine figures illustrated as 'vessels' embodying countries or symbols communicating said stereotypes in early American prints remains considerably broad, thus perpetuating the need for further research regarding this phenomenon. This paper aims first to understand the political cartoon scheme in America during the War of Independence, as well as analyze symbols within the political cartoon, *The Female Combatants* (1776), to consider how interpretations of popular female allegories affect how nations, race, and power are shown in political cartoons. In establishing the relevance of these findings in modern media, this paper extends the conclusions of gender-based models in political cartoons to understand the depiction of female combatants in the leaked Abu Ghraib prison scandal images. The findings of this study concluded that because womanly figures are often tied to notions of nationalism, female representations of nations are used in the media to express various symbolic elements that represent power in gender, race, and politics in a way that connects with existing schemas regarding women.

## Introduction



**Figure 1.** *The Female Combatants, or, Who Shall*. Published on January 17, 1776, on view at Yale Digital Collections.

The satirical cartoon *The Female Combatants* (1776) is somewhat mysterious in its origins, yet a valuable source with which to understand the culture of satirical prints during the American Revolution in both Britain and the Colonies. More specifically, the cartoon's fascinating use of gender, race, and class to convey political themes through portrayals of female allegories, such as Britannia and her Native American daughter, reveals truths about the power of female national symbols in eighteenth-century media and suggests these themes in modern contexts. The satirical cartoon was created and published in London; the creator of this captivating print is unknown. At the very least, the "Price 6d" inscription at the bottom of the etching indicates that the work was commercially sold, possibly as part of a newspaper or individual pamphlet.

*The Female Combatants* features a mother and daughter: a Native American girl representing the Colonies, and a fancy white mother representing Britannia. The Native American girl is illustrated nude, save for her multi-colored feathered skirt and headpiece. Britannia, on the other hand, is dressed up nicely, with similar feathers in her hair. The two women stand at a similar stature, sharing practically the same porcelain skin tone. The uneasy state of the two's mother-daughter relationship is portrayed through their dialogue; Britannia tells her daughter she'll "force her into obedience," calling her a "rebellious slut," and her Native American daughter replies with "liberty, liberty forever mother while I exist." Furthermore, the two appear to be exchanging physical blows with each other, and Britannia's expression seems annoyed and angry. In addition to the two women, there are two shields with various symbols representing the two nations sitting against two trees as well as the mottos "for obedience" and "for liberty" below the shields.

When first discovering this piece, I was stunned by how different the illustration was from what came to mind regarding the phrase 'female combatants.' I imagined female combatants to be soldiers fighting in a war, holding down forts, or completing missions. Moreover, the way the mother and daughter were striking each other seemed so amateurish, reminiscent of a fight one would have with their parents, not a fight that would represent a deep conflict between two nations. The fact that this historical caricature that features two

un-soldier like women was titled *The Female Combatants* seemed so foreign to me, and I was driven to understand how and why these women would be seen as champions fighting for their countries when the caricature was published.

This paper argues how the illustrator of *The Female Combatants* — as well as other caricature illustrators during the American Revolution — uses gender, race, and politics expressed through female symbols to effectively convey messages of power to the public. Today, the masculine and feminine roles of power and agency in these satirical caricatures continue to be used as visual artifacts in modern day scenarios, such as the photographs of American women soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison leaked to the public in 2004.

To deepen my investigation and get first-hand information on the media during the American Revolution, I used primary sources in the form of political satirical prints and novels as comparisons and references. I also used secondary sources such as journal articles and books to understand existing theories about gender and the racialization of gender during the American Revolution in order to interpret both caricatures and photographs.

## Theories on Gender, Race, and Nationalism in Eighteenth-century Satirical Prints

In order to understand the implications of *The Female Combatants* (1776) on race, gender, and body politics during the American Revolution, it is critical to familiarize ourselves with the ever-present symbols in both the American and British presses, the use of women's bodies as personifications of the political relationship between Britain and the Colonies, and the stereotypes that make up the peculiar rendition of a Native American woman as the face of the Colonies.

Female figures have been used to represent nations, often due to existing ideologies and schema regarding feminine traits and women's bodies. It is not only the perceived nonvisual attributes of women that contribute to this representation, but also the visible, physical characteristics. A woman's "figure" has been compared to the topography of a country's landscape, both in terms of appearance and its reproductive qualities (Stirling 2008, 21). Both the land and women have the capacity to biologically reproduce, but through women, not only is the "physical [...] existence" of a nation propagated, but also the nation's ideologies (Stirling 2008, 16, 21-22). However, these conceptions are untrue. While women do give birth, a woman by herself cannot conceive a new generation. Furthermore, national principles are not passed down by women alone, but by societal factors and influence, including what is wrought by men. In this case, women are falsely seen as the sole bearers of the physical multiplication of a country's peoples, as well as the vessels in which metaphorical nationalistic principles can be dispersed.

It should be noted that women are allegories partly because men do not want to be. Because men are often at the head of nations, they have a certain "ego" that already ties their identity to that of the nation (Mayer 1999, 6). Traditionally, men are the puppeteers of the logistics of nations; they decide what figure will become the face of the nation, lead the government, and make decisions during conflict. Thus, this responsibility for major national progress and achievements with the clear absence of women in the picture encourages men's egos; they believe that national accomplishments are strictly theirs. Despite this, they do not want to be the face of the nation and would rather not have their egos be tainted if they were to make an error in national conflicts (Mayer 1999, 6).

Ann Laura Stoler's *Race and the Education of Desire* incorporates elements of biopolitics to understand the gendering of nations. In biopolitics, sex is seen as something that reveals a country's fortitude through both "political energy and biological vigor" (Stoler 1995, 35), and thus is a crucial element in the metaphorical aspect of nationalism. Because of this, women are historically seen as mothers, playing a key role in sex to conceive

a successful nation. This motherly conception is also linked to the concept of home. One's love for one's homeland is "expressed simultaneously as sexual desire and as filial adoration," since the longing for the familiarity of home and family is not only connected to sexual inclination, but also to the nostalgic wish for a mother's warmth (Boehmer 2005, 25).

This use of family and home are also evident in English in the words "motherland" and "mother-tongue," which describe a 'natural' connection for citizens of a nation. The word mother is often correlated with ideas of "family [...] roots" and "home" (Boehmer 2005, 27), which conveys the idea that a nation is not merely a population, but a family to which one has deep loyalty. With these ideas, the physical capabilities and qualities of women play a part in the embodiment of the nation, but it is predominantly the metaphorical motherly bond between all citizens of a country that allows women to be interpreted as figureheads for nations.

## **The Birth of Gender, Symbols and Caricature in American and British Political Prints during the American Revolution**

Feminine national symbols during the American Revolution existed thanks to the rise of political symbols and caricatures in both the British and American press. At the time, physical embodiments of Britain and America in the form of Britannia and the American Indian woman became central national figures; they were female allegories that generally veiled women's realistic, second-class political position and foregrounded race and colonial power.

Caricatures only began to gain popularity and influence in Britain's eighteenth-century political culture with the rise of "coffeehouse politicians": everyday printmakers and artists (Rausser 1998, 156). Before the revolution, satirical prints were merely seen as art, not political media (Bushman 1976, 20). However, because of the revolution brewing in the New World, political prints began to resonate with the British public. While the popularity of the works from British coffeehouse politicians would allow more of the middle class to participate and voice their political views, the printmakers' works would often amplify the male citizen's perspective while suppressing the female's, since women rarely produced the caricatures. Rausser stresses how this imbalance caused the discrepancy between the female symbols depicted in caricature and the roles of real women during this time, in which men would often apply their ideas of femininity to create utterly metaphorical female allegories representing the nation and the ideals that they embodied (Rausser 1998, 157).

Britain takes the credit for the rise in demand for political satirical prints from the civilian public. The English printmakers simultaneously popularized the use of symbols in order to push political agendas and exemplify cross-national relationships. These printmakers' works acted as a base for the use of female symbols in the years of the American Revolution. Britannia, the personification of Britain, was often depicted as a motherly yet immortal figure, representing countless virtues of the nation with her uncompromised, unblemished form. One famous example of such representation is the statue of Britannia towering over the Armada Memorial in Plymouth, a monument built in 1888 to celebrate the tercentenary of the defeat of the Spanish Armada.

The visual allegory of Britannia is predominantly regarded as a virgin (despite her mother-figure), which is deemed symbolic of England's "national boundaries" and "integrity" (Stirling 2008, 17). Britain's image as a virgin perpetuates stigma towards real-life women who are not virgins, illustrating that Britannia's flawless representation does not lead to equality or recognition for real, flesh and blood women. In a broader sense, Britannia's goddess-like depiction is so fictitious and far from reality that she is regarded as a mere figurehead, which further excludes ordinary British women from the national camaraderie that she represents.

The American press was not nearly as developed as that of Britain, and printing was mainly reserved for official government or business purposes (Wescot 2007, 49). However, the Americans still utilized symbols based on gender, sexuality, and race — especially their newfound Native American symbol — in political pamphlets and newspapers, which were highly influential sources of news at the time (Humphrey 2013, 196).

Similarly to its British counterpart, the American press often discussed liberty, correlating with the Colonies' goal of independence.

English does not feminize nouns as other European languages do; however, using their own stereotypes and ideologies, the Americans correlated the vulnerable portrayal of the treasure of liberty with the susceptibility of women, establishing their take on a female national allegory (Wescot 2007, 36). As a people striving for independence from a mighty political force, it was essential for the white colonizers to claim a symbol that would represent the values of their new republic and distance themselves from their white counterparts in Britain. To build on the European's perception that natives were naturally free, a female Native American interpretation of the settlers' country allowed white men to evoke a clear image of an underdog that would lead others to vouch for the Colonies' resistance against overpowering Britain (Wescot 2007, 48).

## Female Allegories, National Personifications: Britannia & the Native American

It was not only individual women who were represented in the media as figureheads, but also their female relationships. These relationships would often be seen as related to the political situation between the two nations represented, which is clearly evident in the well-known mother-daughter relationship between Britannia and her Native American daughter.

The grim mother-daughter relationship between Britannia and the Native American also expressed the power imbalance between the two countries, where the relationship was utilized rhetorically by both supporters and skeptics of America's sovereignty. For those doubtful of America's independence, Britannia's actions (and therefore the actions of Britain) would have been taken out of "affection" for her daughter, whereas those supporting independence would deem her actions to be "controlling" (Wescot 2007, 13). Similarly, the Native American daughter's rebellious nature would either be described as disrespectful or courageous, depending on the views of those behind the paper.

Either way, the Native American daughter would almost always be painted as the weaker and racially inferior figure. In some cases, harmony between the two women would be used to display reconciliation between the two countries, such as in *The Reconciliation Between Britania and Her Daughter America* published by T. Colley.<sup>1</sup> However, this caricature also depicts the white male's orchestration of the affair between Britain and America, wherein Holland, France, and Spain (embodied by white men) are pushing against the two's compromise by pitting their ideologies against each other.

To further demonstrate the fleetingness of the pristine female symbol, if a perfect female figurehead was used to embody a nation's highs and morality, then a sexualized, violated rendition of her would exhibit the country's "degradation" (Rauser 1998, 165). For example, in British satirical prints such as *The Able Doctor, or American Swallowing the Bitter Draught*, a Native American woman can be seen being sexually exploited because of her sexual freedom, which was used as a metaphor for liberty. This illustrates how while female figures were seen as polished in their best light, they could also be quickly objectified to show weakness and contempt.

As shown by Britannia and the Native American woman, immaculate metaphorical presentations of female national allegories birthed from male-oriented body politics regarding femininity were quickly degraded to convey hostility. In fact, for the American Indian in particular, further racial inequalities between natives and Euro-Americans and contemporary ideas about the 'savages' of the New World propagated a stereotypical national allegory.

## A Symbol Composed of Stereotypes — The Racial and Gender Prejudices of Europeans Towards the Native American Daughter



In well-known works by women, such as the bestselling novel *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* by Mary Rowlandson, Native Americans were described as inferior. Through stories like these, it comes to light that during and after the American Revolution, Euro-Americans saw the image of a Native American female as their advantage against traditional Britain, but also victimized her by her race and gender.

The strengths of the metaphorical Native American were born from Euro-Americans' stereotypes of the actual natives. European colonizers never truly saw the 'savageness' of the authentic natives admirable in the least. The Europeans made a point to draw the natives as the cultural and racial Other. By replacing the real image of the natives with a symbolic figure whose "[will]" and "[body]" was written by white men, the white settlers were able to suppress the Native Americans' culture and rewrite their history to the white Europeans' advantage (Montrose 1991, 2-3). British-Americans coined the term 'native' to paint the indigenous peoples as wild beasts" who were "native to the land," similarly to how animals are native to a biome, and the term 'Indians' to describe inferior people of color (Smith-Rosenberg 1993, 178), capitalizing off the racial stereotypes that were prevalent in white society.

Euro-American women played a key role in fostering these stereotypes. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg emphasizes, Euro-American women influenced essential stereotypes of Native Americans that would make up the national icon by expressing victimization through novels and narratives. Smith-Rosenberg highlights various texts written by women, particularly Rowlandson's, that describe Native Americans in a violent, barbarian manner, even going as far to claim that Native Americans are "inhumane devils" (Smith-Rosenberg 1993, 180) who would subject Euro-American women to unimaginable pain and suffering. Rowlandson's perspective reveals how the national allegory of the Native American effectively conveyed ideas of freedom to the American public in the press, but was also met with criticism by some.

### *Depictions of the Native American Daughter Based on Political Views*

Amid the revolution, Euro-American colonizers used the 'colored,' savage,' American Indian woman — the acute opposite of the colonizers — to create an "alter ego" (Wescot 2007, 48) which would establish their independence from Britain as well as display the quality they wanted their new republic to stand for: natural liberty against an exploitative authoritarian force. The 'primitive' femininity of the Native American woman also highlighted the imagery of "Wild Woman," wherein Euro-Americans saw honor in confronting their wants — sexual and nonsexual — upfront, instead of powerlessly "abandoning" their desires and ideals like those in the British Empire (Stoler 1995, 174). These racial implications of the Native American further polarized aristocratic and excessive Britannia and the egalitarian American that stood for the middle-class, successfully pitting America's "republican virtues" (Wescot 2007, 50) against those of domineering Britain.

The symbolism of the Native American Woman was depicted differently by different political parties. Britain's Whig party printmakers, critical of Britain's actions towards the Colonies, would paint the Native American rendition of the Colonies as a "noble savage" who was fighting for liberty and virtue. Examples such as *The Tea-Tax Tempest, or Old Time with his Magick-Lantern*, anonymously published in London 1783, show the Native American woman heroically saving the liberty cap from a fire while leading American troops against the chicken-hearted British. This respectable image of the Native American conveys the Whig's view that the Colonies' version of liberty was something that should be cherished and used as a basis for democracy,

In contrast, Tory party printmakers, who saw the taxes placed on the Colonies as just, turned to the portrayal of an "ignoble savage" to characterize the rebels as amiss and violent against a benevolent Britain (Wescot 2007, 22). This is noted in *The Ballance of Power*, published by Robert Wilkinson in London 1781, in which scrambling America, represented as a naked native woman, is no match for composed, civilized Britannia. This image of the sexualized ignoble savage also demonstrated the Tories' view that America's call for liberty was "licentious" (Rauser 1998, 157), represented by the American's national allegory being exposed and defeated. While the nude Native American was seen by the Colonies as a mark of freedom, the British

Tories did not see it this way. In their caricatures, the nudity of the Native American in comparison to the clothed British depicted the shameful, exploited nature of an indecent woman.

In an even more explicit example, *The Parricide, A Sketch of Modern Patriotism*, anonymously published in the Westminster Magazine in London 1776, a Native American woman is depicted with “Medusan” (Wescot 2007, 21) hair and dark skin, waving a torch wildly in her hand, while Britannia lies helplessly on the ground. This illustration caters perfectly to the European’s ignoble savage: one with dark, African-like skin and a villainous hairstyle. In the Europeans’ eyes, this portrayed the natives as merciless, uncivilized individuals.

Despite their political differences, the Colonies and Britain’s Whig and Tory parties all shared something: using female allegories to create political commentary on the unfolding revolution. The same symbols were used in a multitude of ways, whether that be to represent the prosperity of a nation, or to portray it unfavorably.

The depictions of race, gender, and power in the achingly stereotypical symbols of Britannia and the Native American daughter in satirical cartoons cater to the stereotypes of British and American white society regarding women, light and dark skin, and civility. Through this, American, Tory, and Whig printmakers were able to wield and create various messages that reflected their political beliefs and resonated well with the schema of their audiences.

## **Symbols of Women, Nations, and Race in *The Female Combatants* (1776)**

Through understanding the stereotypes and depictions of race, gender, and nations in the media during the American Revolution, we can see the women in *The Female Combatants* in many ways. For Britain’s Tory members, America was likely proved to be uncivilized and rebellious. For the Colonies and Britain’s Whig party, Britannia would have been seen as controlling, and her daughter as courageous. However, when these women are placed in the context of *The Female Combatants*, America is described as a wholesome, true nation, and Britain as a close-minded, disingenuous one.

Based on the illustrator’s use of women, we can infer that the author is supportive of American independence, due to the generally positive portrayal of America alongside the negative portrayal of Britannia. Britannia tries to command her daughter by calling her a slut, inarguably a negative connotation for women during the Revolution, while America honestly lays her life on the line for liberty.

The power affair between Britain and America is represented through the women’s femininity, race, and age. Britannia and her daughter are essentially the same skin tone, which contradicts the reality that the natives were darker than the Europeans. This would be an important distinction for the white public at that time, when darker-skinned figures would be seen as inferior. Because the illustrator is trying to campaign for America’s virtuous values, the Native American has to be painted as fair in order for the public to see America’s ideals as worthy of respect.

The mother-daughter relationship used to depict that of the Colonies and Britain relates back to the ideology that mothers — in this case Britannia — connect the peoples of a nation through parental love and loyalty to family. The Native American daughter is rebelling against this ‘family-bond,’ representing the Colonies’ move for independence from Britain.

This relationship also propagates notions of the two women’s age, and the implications of age to represent the political conflict. In this caricature, age can be seen depicted by the health of the two countries’ representative tree trunks on the ground. While America’s tree is healthy enough to have a liberty cap resting on it, Britain’s tree seems to be decaying, which could be depicting an outdated, “corrupt” Britain, is fighting a losing battle against the young, bright Americans who have the ability to create a more ideal nation (Stirling 2008, 165). This would be very relevant to the political situation at the time this print was published, 1776, when young America was close to independence, having already signed the revolutionary Declaration of Independence.

Power imbalances and differences in civility are also represented through clothing: the juxtaposition between lavishly dressed Britannia and the nearly unclothed Native American. Britannia stands in heels and is dressed in an extravagant array of colors and fabrics to create a hefty dress, her hair piled stylishly tall on top of her head with neatly placed feathers on top. On top of being extravagant, this is also what Western society perceived as civilized: a well-kept, clothed woman. In comparison, the daughter is nude save for a feathered and handmade-looking skirt and a crown of rainbow feathers on top of her loose hair. In this case, the Native American is uncivilized: barely clothed and unkept. This demonstrates the differences in power; Britannia is white, motherly, and civilized, which are all qualities that are respected in British society, while the Native American daughter is a person of color, rebellious, and uncivilized, representing the inadequacies that the British saw in the Colonies.

Despite the acknowledgement of this power-imbalance, the depiction of these women can be understood in a way that favored the Americans. The Native American's nudity adheres to the racially powered stereotypes of an uncivilized 'savage', but also functions to represent the freedom of the male Euro-American colonizers to satisfy their sexual inclinations in any way they liked. This liberation to do whatever they wanted amplified and justified their hunger for independence. In contrast, Britannia is modestly clothed, which displays constraints of the British who were unable to be free, sexually and politically.

Although tea is the most well-known commodity that angered the Colonies due to Britain's tax, apparel also played an important part in provoking America's desire for independence (Robson 2013, 28). This is because the British often withheld and banned certain textiles or clothes from the Colonies, even though the raw materials came from America. Applied to *The Female Combatants*, Britannia is seen flaunting her exorbitant dress crafted from Britain's profiteering from America's materials in front of her American daughter who does not own these pieces, although the materials come from her homeland. Despite the pitiful outfit America has on compared to her mother, Americans took pride in the simplicity of their "homespun" apparel and looks, which became a symbol of transparency and honesty in their beliefs (Robson 2013, 30). The Native American girl's look only further indicates Britain's frilliness and snobbishness compared to America's pride in their uncomplicated wear.

To top it all off, the similarities between the pair's headpieces are too noticeable to not be intentional. Feathered headdresses similar to the one drawn on the daughter were common in depictions of Native Americans in Western Europe (Montrose 1991, 3), such as in the satirical piece *A political concert; the vocal parts by 1. Miss America, 2. Franklin, 3. F--x, 4. Kepp--ll, 5. Mrs. Britania, 6. Shelb--n, 7. Dun--i--g, 8. Benidick Rattle Snake* by Thomas Colley published in London 1783. It is likely that this depiction came to ubiquity due to notions of both the British and the Americans that Native Americans were living purely and naturally, thus leading the British and Americans to associate the Native Americans with the ungroomed, wild feathers of a bird. On the contrary, feather-like headpieces on Britannia were not nearly as prominent, which means that the addition was likely a conscious effort by the illustrator to communicate a message. Since there is a recurring theme in this caricature where the two women resemble each other due to their family bond, it can be inferred that her headpiece is also a testament to the naturally free elements of Native American culture. Britannia's feathers are far more well-kept compared to her daughters, but the key colors and shapes are incredibly similar, alluding to the fact that while eighteenth-century Britain entertained ideas of republican liberty (as seen in the Whig party), they were far milder and more muzzled compared to the fiery patriotism of the Colonies.

The contrast between Britain's traditionalism and insincerity and America's free and noble principles is also highlighted through the two women's height. While upon first glance the mother is taller than her daughter, after further examination it is seen that without the mother's high-heeled shoes and her towering hairdo, she is no taller than her daughter. This conveys the idea that, although Britain and her principles were seen as more established or worthy than rookie America's, in truth, America's patriotic values were just as valuable as Britain's without the need for unnecessary frills.



The relevance of the two women's symbolism is not limited to their bodies and clothing; it also extends to the other articles in the caricature, such as the ribbons marked "For Obedience" and "For Liberty" underneath Britain and America's shields respectively. The ideas of Britain's principle of obedience and America's desire for liberty connect back to the fight between the two women: Britannia tells her daughter that she'll "force her into obedience," and her daughter vies for "liberty." These notions of liberty and obedience center around the mother and daughter's dispute represent the opposing values of the two countries: Britain wishing for the Colonies' loyalty towards the crown, and America wishing for independence. On top of America's shield perches liberty cap, which further drives home the illustration's emphasis on America's liberation.

The two shields resting on the tree trunks located at opposite corners of the print representing the two nations, have different symbols on them. The American's shield is marked with France's representative Gallic rooster on top of a finger pointing towards the British, which likely represents the American's alliance with France against Britain (McKellop 2020). This finger-pointing is also mirrored by the daughter's extension of arm to strike her mother. On the other side, Britain's shield has a compass on it, which is pointing North. Coincidentally, the name of Britain's Prime Minister during the American War of Independence was Frederick North. Much like the cock represents America's alliance with France, the northern facing compass is a tribute to Britain's allegiance and trust in their Prime Minister. This allusion could also correlate with the extravagant depiction of Britannia, who is dressed in fancy clothes that would likely be found on wealthy aristocrats associated with the government.

To sum up this analysis, depictions of race, gender, age, and class are expressed through women's bodies in caricatures such as *The Female Combatants* to demonstrate nuances of power in both the political and metaphorical conflict between Britain and America.

## Women's Bodies and Femininity in Modern Media: Abu Ghraib

Women's bodies continue to be used to communicate political messages and convey power imbalances in terms of nationality, gender, and race. A sickening example of this is the Abu Ghraib torture scandal, wherein military women were the face of America, which tormented prisoners in an Iraqi prison.

Abu Ghraib was a US prison outside of Baghdad that held around 50,000 people when it was active in 2003. It was created in the context of the Invasion of Iraq: an invasion by the United States to end the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. While Abu Ghraib was established to hold terrorists, it also hosted many petty criminals and civilians who were picked up during military sweeps or highway checkpoints (Hersh 2004). In the public's eyes, Abu Ghraib was an ordinary US military prison until the cruel, abusive conditions of the prison were leaked via photos in 2004.

The photos depict horrifying circumstances. The Iraqi prisoners are seen being mocked by American soldiers; inmates are often pictured naked or injured in the midst of torture and sexual violence with smiling Americans by their side. What is so peculiar about this is that the majority of the Iraq prisoners are photographed with American female soldiers, who are the perpetrators of the violence and brutality.

In the leaked photos, female soldiers are shown to be completely complacent in prisoner abuse, and their actions represent the US against Iraq through the symbolism of race and femininity at Abu Ghraib. This connects back to national female allegories in Revolutionary-era caricatures, wherein women symbols represented Britain and America in conflict, and were utilized politically for their exhibition of gender, race, and power.



**Figure 2.** Photograph of Specialist Sabrina Harman with an Iraqi prisoner. From “The Abu Ghraib torture photographs: News frames, visual culture, and the power of images.” collection by Kari Andén-papadopoulos published in *Journalism* 9, no. 1 in 2008.

The photo of Specialist Sabrina Harman smiling with a thumbs-up over a prisoner covered in ice bags is one of many examples. In other photos, American women soldiers are photographed sexually abusing the Iraqi male prisoners. Soldier Lynndie England is seen posing with a male Iraqi prisoner on a leash lying helplessly on the floor, as well as pointing to the genitalia of masked male prisoners. The American women of the Abu Ghraib prison, particularly Sabrina Harman and Lynndie England, soon became the face of the entire story, their photos plastered on news headlines and newspapers. Because of this, the public quickly regarded the women as the main perpetrators who were “guilty of prisoner abuse” (Caldwell 2012, 145).

Despite the fact that Harman pleaded that she was “forced” by her male superior, Charles Graner, to pose with the detainee (Caldwell 2012, 76), even after “repeatedly” reporting the abuse (Caldwell 2012, 164), it does not, in any way, excuse her and her comrades’ actions. In fact, the female soldiers’ position as women in power exacerbated the torture the US soldiers committed against the Iraqi men, since in both American and Arab culture, being dictated by a female would be considered the utmost form of humiliation.



**Figure 3.** Photograph of Lynndie England with Iraqi prisoner on a leash. From “Behind the Abu Ghraib photos.” by Phillip Stone published on NBC News on October 3, 2005.

Femininity has always been seen as weakness, and the actions of Harman and England describe a shift of femininity from them to the Iraqi men. The power these women held as soldiers in the prison hierarchy designated them as the dominant force, which is key in understanding the symbols they became in their photos

abusing the prisoners. Especially in England's photo where she holds a prisoner on a leash, the roles of the woman and the man have been swapped. In the photo, the male prisoner is leashed at the neck, dominated by England. This picture is not dissimilar to that of sadistic pornographic content and rape, wherein the woman is submitted to the man by force — represented visually through the leash. This is seen in England's photo; England represents the dominant male, while the Iraqi male represents the female victim. By comparing these two situations, it is clear that in Abu Ghraib, the role of the white American female soldiers like England was to feminize the male Iraqi prisoners, torturing them in ways that women would be in other cases.

The symbol of these women soldiers is not only applicable to the bodies of England and the male prisoners, but also to the representation of countries. In both Iraq and America — along with the rest of the world — women are fundamentally seen as biologically and mentally inferior to men. In portraying the Iraqi prisoners as feminine victims of American female soldiers, Iraq is symbolized as the powerless, defenseless victim. On the other hand, the masculine, violent ways in which the female soldiers acted symbolizes America as the powerful superior. Moreover, the fact that the women soldiers are inherently feminine further humiliates the Iraqi prisoners, representing Iraq, as the prisoners are seen as victims of weak women.

In both the public and in the military, women soldiers are more often seen as women dressing up as combatants, not actual soldiers. Feminist theorist Cynthia Enloe represents this through the gendering of toys: female soldiers are advertised as dolls in "authentic" military gear while male soldiers are simply advertised as soldiers (Enloe 2000, 10). Additionally, Enloe describes the masculine notions of the military as "privileged," as femininity, or "weakness" shouldn't take priority over "male bonding" in bringing together military units (Enloe 2000, 156). This theory shows that the photos with Harman and England insinuated to the public, including Iraq, that even women in a misogynistic environment were more masculine and powerful than the incapable, Arab male prisoners, further shaming Iraq.

The race of Harman and England also played a role in their representation of the US military in the media. Both women are white, which visually labelled them as foreign American soldiers in a Middle-Eastern land. Additionally, they were also likely seen as privileged and empowered thanks to their race and institution, and the public expected them to act in a mature way towards their demeaned prisoners. The public saw the photos as a horrid exploitation of power, not only because of the soldier-prisoner relationship, but also because of the power imbalance between the savior that was the white American military and the helpless Iraqi detainees.

The actions of these women who were acting of their own power and accord show how femininity is not just about women, but about *who* is feminine in a scenario. In this case, the symbolism of white American soldiers Harman and England's femininity is used both to humiliate the country of Iraq and bodies of its male soldiers as well as feature the distinct shift in gender roles caused by the sexual torture of the male prisoners.

## Conclusion

Throughout history, women's bodies have been key figureheads to represent nations, gender, race, and politics in times of conflict and peace. Today, women in war are still seen in the media as peculiar, especially when they commit violent actions that are outside society's constructs for how a woman should act. By analyzing the satirical caricature, *The Female Combatants*, to understand the rationale behind female allegories for nations, this paper has argued that women, and women's bodies are used to represent nations through gender, race, and politics, both in historical satirical caricature and modern day photos.

In the era of the American War of Independence, female symbols were mostly communicated through satirical prints that conveyed political messages. These prints originated primarily from coffeehouse politicians in Britain at the time, who found that ideologies of women were effective in symbolizing a nation's values and citizens' loyalty to their country, resonating with the public. Through various forms of media, such as pamphlets, newspapers, and cartoons, different renditions of women were distributed far and wide to pitch liberal

or conservative political agendas. Once the idea of female symbols reached the Colonies on the other side of the revolution, the Americans used the racial and gender identity of a Native American girl to forge and represent a key principle of their new nation: natural liberty.

In a modern context, women were also seen as the main figures of the notorious Abu Ghraib prison scandal. In a series of appalling leaked photos, white American female soldiers were seen cheerfully posing with sexually tortured — sometimes even deceased — prisoners, which displayed a swap in gender roles to highlight power in terms of race and nationality between white America and Arab Iraq.

Through analyzing American Revolution era caricatures as well as the Abu Ghraib prisoner torture photos, this paper has concluded that because of stereotypes and ideologies regarding women, feminine figures have always been tied to ideas of nationalism. Because of this, female representations of nations are used in the media to express various symbolic elements that all represent power in gender, race, and politics to the public in a way that connects with existing schemas regarding women.

## Notes

1. All the caricature mentioned in this article, unless stated otherwise, are on view at the collection *The American Revolution in drawings and prints; a checklist of 1765-1790 graphics* from the Library of Congress.

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