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Boys Will Be Boys:

The Influence of Gender in the Spanish-American War

The Spanish-American War has traditionally been understood from an economic perspective. According to this interpretation Cuba and the Philippines represented new markets able to assuage the anxiety surrounding the depression of 1893, an anxiety that had been exacerbated by Frederick Jackson Turner's declaration of a "closed" frontier. With no possibility of emerging domestic markets, many thought the decision was to either expand beyond national borders or face economic stagnation.

Author Kristin Hoganson introduces the concept of gender roles as an alternative cause for war in her book *Fighting for Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars*. In this book Hoganson argues that the absence of military experience among men—the Civil War generation was reaching old age—combined with the emergence of the Women's Suffrage movement to prompt male political leaders to reassert their right to authority through military action. Hoganson demonstrates male chauvinism in numerous convincing excerpts of senate speeches; however, her reliance on political rhetoric as her primary source weakens the argument. Further, in numerous instances Hoganson attributes gender to dialogue where it is not necessarily applicable. Advocates of "strength" and "courage", for example, are described as appealing to manliness when these

characteristics are gender neutral. Because of these limitations, Hoganson is ultimately unsuccessful in her argument that gender was a “cornerstone” of the Spanish-American War.ⁱ

Hoganson explicitly states her dependence on political rhetoric for evidence. In the introduction she asserts “this book takes rhetoric seriously” and that her sources are “primarily political speeches.”ⁱⁱ Unfortunately, the Senate floor is a notoriously duplicitous forum. Superficial platitudes and talk of high-minded ideals often belie the realpolitik that motivates politics. If political speeches were valid sources it follows that the Iraq war is about “freedom.” It is the responsibility of the historian is to go beyond easily digestible sound bites and articulate the complex truth. Hoganson’s demonstration of the effectiveness of gender as rhetoric is both interesting and theoretically adventurous, but the use of gender roles in political speeches does not prove it to be a determining factor of the war.

Fighting for Manhood provides ample evidence for Hoganson’s argument. In fact, it seems that the novelty of her claim caused Hoganson to overcompensate by citing similar examples ad nauseam. Too often, however, she framed her examples to fit her argument when it was not clear they were a good fit. For example, Sen. Money is quoted as saying that war is good for the country because “it teaches us devotion, self-abnegation, [and] courage.”ⁱⁱⁱ Hoganson uses Senator Money’s words to argue for the role of gender in politics, but this argument relies on a critical assumption because the attributes he is espousing are not explicitly masculine. Other references to “honor” and “backbone” are similarly engendered by Hoganson.

Pressure to be “manly” influenced politicians in the debate surrounding the Spanish-American War. If Hoganson had limited her thesis to this assertion she would have succeeded. But she did not. She argued that gender was a primary cause for the war. The dubious sources

used to support that claim, combined with the author's manipulation of those sources, prevent her argument from being convincing. Hoganson does succeed, however, in raising an interesting question: "Is gender a useful category in understanding U.S foreign relations?"^{iv} Yes, it is. Gender roles have existed throughout history and they exist today. Understanding how social pressure to fulfill gender expectations has influenced people through time will create a fuller, richer history. The responsibility for historians who look through this lens is to be aware that these distinctions are largely social constructs, and to be sure not to present them as natural and static to the reader.

ⁱ Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 13

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 14.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 73.

^{iv} Bischoff, syllabus