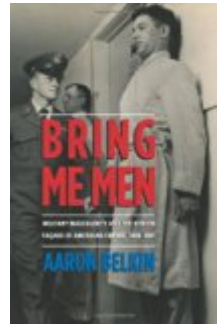


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Aaron Belkin. *Bring Me Men: Military Masculinity and the Benign Façade of American Empire, 1898-2001*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. Illustrations. 244 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-70284-3; \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-70285-0; (paperback), ISBN 978-0-19-932760-7.

Reviewed by Annessa Babic (Long Island University, CW Post Campus)
Published on H-Diplo (November, 2012)
Commissioned by Seth Offebach



When opening a book about masculinity and the American military one would be remiss to not expect some scenes of gore, horror, and a little bit of stomach curdle. Accordingly, in a compact study on masculinity, the military, and American imperialism, Aaron Belkin exemplifies his argument with examples of forced sexual behaviors, standards of dress and hygiene, and outright rape in sometimes painstakingly graphic detail. Belkin's *Bring Me Men* provides a valiant showing of query into the culture of masculinity and its meaning for the U.S. military and its position of power (and wealth) on the global stage. The reader is certainly engaged, but the question remains—as it should—does the petite tome explain military masculinity and provide its context within the continually changing American Empire? Belkin argues that “during the roughly century-long period from 1898-2001, when the U.S. established and consolidated its global reach, the production of masculine warriors has required those who embody masculinity to enter into intimate relationships with femininity, queerness and other unmasculine foils, not just to disavow them” (p. 4).

This short book, 185 pages of actual text with seven images, establishes itself within a strong base of theory. Scholars of gender frequently come back to the well-known and expected references to Judith Butler; Belkin does not fail in this regard. However, he does leave the reader at odds with Butler's conception of gender and how it plays into his study on military masculinity. In his introduction, the author notes that “demonization and scapegoating that sustained military masculinity have depended on factual distortion and leaps of imagination to convey the impression that abjection

characterizes members of outcast groups, but not normative warriors” (p. 5). He acknowledges that the boundaries of masculinity—especially within the confines of the military—are not static. Yet he does not fully develop the boundaries—or concrete definition per se—of the normative soldier.

The study is succinctly divided into two sections, with the first introducing the theoretical base of masculinity. As stated, Belkin sets the perimeters of his philosophy within the established scholarship on gender and queer theories, but he stops short of placing these social codes—even niche mores as they are defined to exist for the military—into a larger nationalistic rhetoric. In the theory and subsequent case study sections, he spends a great deal of time discussing the acts, expectations, and ramifications for self-policing within the military. His study mainly focuses on the 1898 Spanish-American War and early 2000s queries at the U.S. Naval Academy, with notes on West Point, but leaves large unexplored holes throughout his work. He briefly mentions the Vietnam War in the last chapter of the book, but does not explore the in-depth narratives of the First and Second World Wars and the Korean conflict. Particularly with the Korean conflict, the guise of masculinity and proliferation of prostitution houses adjacent to U.S. military bases seem pertinent for this study.

Belkin's use of Butler's established gender discourse is implied, but he never fully defines “masculine.” Within this discussion, however, he does make some interesting points concerning the military's obsession with hygiene and cleanliness. Throughout the text, which promises to

examine the U.S. military in the guise of imperialism, the actual perception of the United States by world powers is left out of the narrative. Yet *Shit River* in the Philippines does play a role in examining hygiene. Here, as U.S. soldiers tossed money into the river literally riddled with the waste of U.S. troops, natives gathered and dove into the waterway to capture the coinage. Belkin describes the soldiers as laughing at the sight of young Filipinos diving into the murky waters for nickels and dimes. Belkin implies that the United States is writing this story of behavior because through the metaphorical weight of the U.S. dollar, the poor, nonwhite classes were willing to lower themselves into literal shit-filled waters to grasp tokens of wealth and exchange. Specifically, the moments of Filipinos forced to “besmirch themselves, to constitute themselves as putrescent, to follow a script that was written by Americans” reinforces the powers of empire (pp. 152-153). Unfortunately, how Filipinos saw these actions during the U.S. occupation of military bases is excluded from the discussion. The 1960s and 1970s saw the U.S. military implement beautification projects—building toilets, distributing soap, establishing beauty pageants—but this circumvented the Filipino response. Instead, the reader sees how the United States viewed Filipino filth as “a marker of childishness as well as overwhelming power in the form of savagery and monstrosity” (p. 155).

The author also includes an interesting analysis of a 2004 remark made by a professor at the U.S. Naval Academy, stating that the cadets “rape each other all of the time” (p. 79). In this statement, the professor specifically pointed to vaginal penetration of female victims.

In contrast, the rape of the female plays a minor role in Belkin’s work. According to him, the soldier’s fear is that being penetrated makes him weak and possibly a homosexual. But, just as Belkin neglects to show what Filipinos thought of the United States, he also avoids examining why perpetrators commit acts of penetration and rape in heterosexual and homosexual acts of violence.

Perhaps the underlying conception here is that the construction of military masculinity is yet to be defined. Even though this work mainly focuses on the Spanish-American War and the Naval Academy in an era of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” with snippets of intervening years, key factors on the development of masculinity can be taken from the research. These key factors are acts of penetration, filth, and obedience. As U.S. forces entered for the first time a global arena with the Spanish-American conflict, their survival required uniformity, standardization, and an almost blind cohesion. As the author asserts in his epilogue, “the ideal of military masculinity is a site where the power of the normal has been reinforced in such a way as to crowd out alternatives and diminish expressive possibilities” (p. 182). Therefore, it can be implied, that the core of U.S. military masculinity resides in the principle of not being the other. The other, a concept not completely defined by sexuality, gender, and race, must be shammed while also secretly experimented with acts of rape on others. To perform within the guise of military masculinity, the soldier must fit within the matrix prescribed; refusing to commit sexualized acts on cohorts would be perceived as an act of defiance.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Annessa Babic. Review of Belkin, Aaron, *Bring Me Men: Military Masculinity and the Benign Façade of American Empire, 1898-2001*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. November, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36948>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.