

Mary Douglas Vavrus. *Postfeminist War: Women in the Media-Military-Industrial Complex*. War Culture Series. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018. 248 pp. \$28.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8135-7681-7.



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Published on H-War (June, 2022)

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Postfeminist War is a critical examination of the media political economy, or what author Mary Douglas Vavrus titles the “media-military-industrial-complex” (MMIC). The overarching claim Vavrus supports is that the media, since 9/11, has participated in increasing militarism, specifically by integrating women into “regimes of truth about the military and war” (p. 28). Citing the need to court an array of men and women to an all-volunteer force, Vavrus establishes that the US media generally avoids overtly regressive or anti-feminist portrayals of women, instead opting for post-feminist framing. In particular, she advances the term “martial postfeminism” to describe “an ideology that both pushes military solutions for an array of problems that women and girls face and endorses war by either glorifying or obscuring the forms of violence it entails” (p. 4). In the four chapters that follow the introduction, Vavrus delves into how various media representations portray women in relation to four topics—marriage/family, motherhood, combat, and sexual violence—all the while ignoring the structural issues

that women face, including racism, economic inequality, and misogyny.

As a case study, chapter 1, which examines the popular TV show *Army Wives*, is both interesting and poignantly illustrative of Vavrus’s central thesis. Through the portrayal of (heterosexual) family life on a fictional military base in the United States, the popular show forges a strategic alliance between the Lifetime network and the Department of Defense. Throughout the chapter, Vavrus highlights the “banality of militarism” woven into the show’s overarching message as well as the specific ways it appeals to a range of women by enhancing identification with family life as it relates to military service, ultimately reducing critical interrogation of military intervention itself (p. 5).

In the second chapter, Vavrus looks at representations of motherhood in the news, arguing that the state must win at least the passive cooperation of mothers—a challenging feat, given the inherent danger and sacrifice required of military service.

In this case, she investigates a plethora of news stories that situate mothers within the military industrial complex (MIC), illuminating how coverage is dominated by mothers who support George W. Bush-era politics. For example, she argues that the positive, widespread coverage of so-called Security Moms and their need for a strong patriarchal figure to protect them/their children (embodied by Bush) allows the media to establish a clear connection between war and maternal love.

Chapter 3 best highlights Vavrus's postfeminist argument, arguing that the women as warriors frame enables a postfeminist/postracial outlook on the military. Driven by the need to maintain and sustain women recruits, Vavrus contends, the so-called women friendly discourses that highlight women's achievements and equality within the military are outwardly laudable yet ultimately work to underplay the many structural issues women in the military continue to face, including pervasive sexual violence. This theme continues in chapter 4, as Vavrus tracks media discourse about sexual violence in the military. The predominate revelation is that the media largely ignores the topic, with a few notable exceptions, including the 2012 film *The Invisible War*. Additionally, Vavrus uncovers how coverage tends to focus on the negative impact and ramifications sexual assault has on individual careers while avoiding structural conversations about the culture of toxic masculinity that allows it to endure. The consequences of this trajectory, according to Vavrus, are the continued patriarchal hierarchy and "warrior mystique" that influences coverage of sexual assault in the military, as well as the naive assumption that women will somehow transform this problem on their own (p. 110).

Vavrus covers a lot of important ground in *Postfeminist War*. At times, this comes at the expense of a more succinct composition whereby some of the case studies can feel slightly meandering. As a critical account, few claims are left unsupported, though the conclusion does leave a bit

to be desired. Understandably, Vavrus's detailed unpacking of the MMIC does not warrant perfect solutions, but the "small changes" suggested, like requiring the media to disclose ties to the MIC as part of war coverage, seem somewhat unrealistic given the strength of the arguments laid out in the preceding chapters. Despite these few limitations, the book is a well-argued and a necessary critique of the US MMIC; it is well suited for graduate level study in areas related to military studies, women's and gender studies, and media or communication studies.

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Citation: Sara Kitsch. Review of Vavrus, Mary Douglas, *Postfeminist War: Women in the Media-Military-Industrial Complex*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2022.

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