

Book Review

***The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America* By Susan Faludi**

Laura R. Woliver
University of South Carolina, U.S.A.

As an insightful cultural observer and analyst Susan Faludi has highlighted the gender bias in many of the trends, policies, laws, and actions of powerful Americans for decades. Her previous prescient books: *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991) and *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (1999) helped many understand that strong themes in neo-conservative thought and politics in the United States were heavily laced with gender bias and policies favorable to the upper class. The increasing gap between the rich and the poor, the eroding economic security of working class and middle class families, the job losses, pension evaporations, and benefit erosions of Americans in 2008 and 2009 are presaged in these two books.

In her 2007 book *The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny*¹ in an *Insecure America* Faludi continues her excavation of backlashes and betrayals as seen in the actions of American policymakers, media frames, and use of powerful cultural tropes following the September 11, 2001 attacks against the United States. After the attacks we did not delve into trying to comprehend what had happened and fashioning a reasonable response. Faludi asserts, We explained our failure to probe the same way that the Bush administration explained its failures to protect us: the attack was "unimaginable" (p. 3). Instead, we replicated old behaviors and scripts of cowboys, male warriors, avengers, and chivalrous rescuers while at the same time appropriating and often misrepresenting the stories of many

¹ New York, N.Y.: Picador, Henry Holt and Co. 2007. All page references in the text are to this book.

of the real participants of the events such as Jessica Lynch, the New York City Firefighters, and the widows and widowers of 9/11.

Unexamined, strong beliefs in American triumphalism and invincibility meant that, Our self-confinement to our dream state helped lead us into a misbegotten war against people who had not attacked us, crippled our fight against those who had, and destroyed so many lives, soldier and civilian, American and Arab. Recovering from our wound and prevailing against our enemies required sagacity and hard realism; instead we dreamed ourselves into a penny-dreadful plot that had little to do with the actual world in which we must live (p. 18). As a result, evoking historic myths and symbols would doom our response to the catastrophe that stuck our home soil on 9/11, when, called to forge a mindful future, we succumbed to the haunting of a fabricated past (p. 375).

Many puzzles and paradoxes are illuminated by Faludi. For example, she notes, There is a mystery here: the last remaining superpower, a nation attacked precisely *because* of its imperial preeminence, responded by fixating on its weakness and ineffectuality. Even more peculiar was our displacement of that fixation into the domestic realm, into a sexualized struggle between depleted masculinity and overbearing womanhood. What well of insecurity did this mystery unearth? (p. 12, italics in original).

Gleeful proclamations that 9/11 would stall progress on women's rights in the United States were particularly strange. After all, as Faludi points out, By what mental process had these journalists traveled from the inferno at ground zero to a repudiation of female independence? Why would they respond to terrorists attack by heralding feminism's demise especially an attack hatched by avowed antagonists of Western women's liberation? (p. 24). Especially women writers and commentators like Susan Sontag, Oprah Winfrey, Katha Pollitt, Arundhati Roy, and Barbara Kingsolver, were vilified for mentioning alternative viewpoints or raising questions about the wisdom of the Bush Administration's actions. As many Americans witnessed, people were resigned to plaintive bumper stickers on their cars recalling that, Dissent is patriotic or Peace is patriotic.

The Terror Dream documents the disappearance of female commentators from major media outlets after 9/11, the glossing over of the intelligence failures of the Bush administration prior to 9/11, the derision heaped on

New York City firefighters who pointed out that a long lamented lack of modern communication equipment was a contributing cause for the high first responder death rates, the hijacking of both Private Jessica Lynch's story and widow Lisa Beamer's perspectives into a standard Hollywood script of helpless females and heroic males, to name a few. The standard response did not help us explore the complexities of the events and the aftermath of 9/11. Instead, denial of the complexities meant that we did not adequately address why the fire fighters had such poor equipment, why Jessica Lynch's unit was placed in harm's way in Iraq, for instance. Indeed, it took some persistent, dissenting women called the New Jersey girls or Jersey widows who relentlessly pressed for an independent commission on 9/11 which eventually reported on intelligence failures and systematic problems contributing to the tragedy of 9/11. For their efforts, one conservative American pundit claimed that the 9/11 widows were enjoying their husbands' deaths (p. 137-145). As Faludi aptly sums up, *The Jersey Girls* were swiftly swift-boated (p. 145). Rage was directed at any person, particularly a woman, who spoke out, asked questions, went off the desired script, or tried to correct the record. For example, Faludi reports, New York city firewomen who asked about their dwindling numbers in the ranks were denounced by some as unpatriotic and selfish (p. 110).

American media concocted new trends in women's behavior post 9/11. The stories relayed that American women after 9/11 wanted to get married, have children, nest and cocoon, and opt out of the career and work world. A phrase was even coined during the 2004 election to encapsulate these desires, the security mom. Investigation of the actual public opinion data, and social behavior statistics eventually debunked these myths: Yet, they refused to die. The trend of a reconstituted "traditional" womanhood seemed viral, immune to the antibiotics of common sense or statistical hard evidence. It existed in the spectral realm of myth, where its relationship to the illusion of security was symbiotic and self-perpetuating each ginned-up generalization validating the existence of the other, each providing its counterpart with a penumbra of emotional authenticity (p. 186).

The social class aspects of American reactions to 9/11 have been explored by many cultural observers. Powerful images of how working class and poor boys and girls are targeted by U.S. military recruiters, and

of the absence of family members from the U.S. Congress serving in the War on Terror is captured in the documentary by Michael Moore entitled, *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Similarly, Faludi's examination of post 9/11 America would have been strengthened by more discussion of social class and race dynamics within the military response and who in America actually sacrificed and performed the services the ill considered War in Iraq engendered.

Sticking to the triumphal script, however, made us less secure. By refusing to grapple with the actual failures that led to 9/11, Faludi warns, and by refusing to listen to the people who tried to call attention to those failures, the nation denied its citizenry any real accounting of the missteps that led to catastrophe and any real assurance that we were any better equipped to prevent or repel another terrorist attack (p. 385).

By mid-2007 when *The Terror Dream* most likely went to press, Faludi describes many in America as still sleepwalking, unable to comprehend and absorb the events of 9/11. Reading her book now, after the 2008 United States elections, a reader might wonder if some Americans woke up to some of the delusions and distractions of the culture wars folded into the terror dream and repudiated with their ballots the backlashed and stiffed regime in favor of new ideas of the Barak Obama administration and large Democratic majorities in the U.S. Congress. One sign of our hoped for journey back to political and cultural reasonableness is that Barak Obama did not appear in hunting attire holding a big, deadly weapon while campaigning, yet was the victorious presidential candidate in 2008. Faludi's *The Terror Dream* is important, thought provoking and well written. We should all hope that future American decision makers do not stumble around in a similar dream state when new crises occur.

Biographical Note: **Laura R. Woliver** is a professor in the Department of Political Science and the Women's and Gender Studies Program at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. She received her undergraduate degree from the University of Colorado in Boulder in 1975. She earned her Ph.D in political science from the University of Wisconsin in Madison in 1986. Her expertise is American politics, women and politics, interest groups, social movements, and reproductive politics. She is the author of two books: *From Outrage to Action: The Politics of Grass Roots Dissent*. University of Illinois Press, 1993, and *The Political Geographies of Pregnancy*, also University of Illinois Press, 2002. In addition she has published dozens of articles, book chapters, and comments. She has been the President of the Women's Caucus in Political Science. She is currently the Graduate Director in the Department of Political Science.