

Barnard Commencement 2004

Speech by Barbara Ehrenreich

It is a total thrill to share this day with you today. I really feel honored to participate.

How many of you are parents of graduates? What I'm really curious about is how you managed to get here today, after paying all that money for tuition - Greyhound bus? I put two kids thru Ivy League myself, which meant I had to hitchhike to their commencement ceremonies.

I had another speech prepared for today- all about the cost of college and how the doors to higher education are closing to all but the wealthy. It was a good speech - lots of laugh lines - but 2 weeks ago something came along that wiped the smile right off my face. You know, you saw them too - the photographs of American soldiers sadistically humiliating and abusing detainees in Iraq.

These photos turned my stomach - yours too, I'm sure. But they did something else to me: they broke my heart. I had no illusions about the United States mission in Iraq, but it turns out that I did have some illusions about women.

There was the photo of Specialist Sabrina Harman smiling an impish little smile and giving the thumbs sign from behind a pile of naked Iraqi men - as if to say, "Hi mom, here I am in Abu Ghraib!"

We've gone from the banality of evil... to the cuteness of evil. There was the photo of Private First Class Lynndie England dragging a naked Iraqi man on a leash. She's cute too, in those cool cammy pants and high boots. He's grimacing in pain. If you were doing PR for al Qaeda, you couldn't have staged a better picture to galvanize misogynist Islamic fundamentalists around the world.

And never underestimate the misogyny of the real enemy, which was never the Iraqis; it was and should be the Al Qaeda-type fundamentalist extremists: Two weeks ago in eastern Afghanistan, suspected Taliban members (I thought we had defeated them, but never mind) ... poisoned three little girls for the crime of going to school. That seems to be the attitude in that camp: In the case of women: better dead than well read.

But here in these photos from Abu Ghraib, you have every Islamic fundamentalist stereotype of Western culture -- all nicely arranged in one hideous image-- imperial arrogance, sexual depravity... and gender equality.

Now we don't know whether women were encouraged to participate. All we know is they didn't say no. Of the 7 US soldiers now charged with the abuse of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, 3 are women: Harman, England and Megan Ambuhl.

Maybe I shouldn't have been so shocked. Certainly not about the existence of abuse. Reports of this and similar abuse have been leaking out of Guantanamo and immigrant detention centers in NYC for over a year. We know, if we've been paying attention, that similar kinds of abuse, including sexual humiliation, are not unusual in our own vast US prison system.

We know too, that good people can do terrible things under the right circumstances. This is what psychologist Stanley Milgram found in his famous experiments in the 1960s.

Sabrina and Lynndie are not congenitally evil people. They are working class women who wanted to go to college and knew the military as the quickest way in that direction. Once they got in, they wanted to fit in.

And I shouldn't be surprised either because I never believed that women are innately less aggressive than men. I have argued this repeatedly - once with the famously macho anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon.

When he kept insisting that women are just too nice and incapable of combat, I answered him the best way I could: I asked him if he wanted to step outside...

I have supported full opportunity for women within the military, in part because -- with rising tuition-- it's one of the few options around for low-income young people.

I opposed the first Gulf War in 1991, but at the same time I was proud of our servicewomen and delighted that their presence irked their Saudi hosts. Secretly, I hoped that the presence of women would eventually change the military, making it more respectful of other people and their cultures, more capable of genuine peace keeping.

That's what I thought, but I don't think that any more.

A lot of things died with those photos.

The last moral justification for the war with Iraq died with those photos. First the justification was the supposed weapons of mass destruction. Then it was the supposed links between Saddam and Osama bin Laden - those links were never found either. So the final justification was that we had removed an evil dictator who tortured his own people. As recently as April 30, George Bush exulted that the torture chambers of Iraq were no longer operating.

Well, it turns out they were just operating under different management. We didn't displace Saddam Hussein; we replaced him.

And when you throw in the similar abuses in Afghanistan and Guantanamo, in immigrant detention centers and US prisons, you see that we have created a spreading regime of torture - an empire of pain.

But there's another thing that died for me in the last couple of weeks - a certain kind of feminism or, perhaps I should say, a certain kind of feminist naiveté.

It was a kind of feminism that saw men as the perpetual perpetrators, women as the perpetual victims, and male sexual violence against women as the root of all injustice. Maybe this sort of feminism made more sense in the 1970s.

Certainly it seemed to make sense when we learned about the rape camps in Bosnia in the early 90s. There was a lot of talk about women then - I remember because I was in the discussions - about rape as an instrument of war and even war as an extension of rape.

I didn't agree, but I didn't disagree very loudly either. There seemed to be at least some reason to believe that male sexual sadism may somehow be deeply connected to our species' tragic propensity for violence.

That was before we had seen female sexual sadism in action.

But it's not just the theory of this naïve feminism that was wrong. So was= its strategy and vision for change. That strategy and vision for change rested on the assumption, implicit or stated outright, that women are morally superior to men. We had a lot of debates over whether it was biology or conditioning that made women superior- or maybe the experience of being a woman in a sexist culture. But the assumption of superiority was beyond debate. After all, women do most of the caring work in our culture, and in polls are consistently less inclined toward war than men.

Now I'm not the only one wrestling with that assumption today. Here's Mary Jo Melone, a columnist in the *St. Petersburg Times*, writing on May 7: "I can't get this picture of [Pfc. Lynndie] England out of my head because this is not how women are expected to behave. Feminism taught me 30 years ago that not only had women gotten a raw deal from men, but that we were morally superior to them."

Now the implication of this assumption was that all we had to do to make the world a better place - kinder, less violent, more just - was to assimilate into what had been, for so many centuries, the world of men. We would fight so that women could become the CEOs, the senators, the generals, the judges and opinion-makers - because that was really the only fight we had to undertake. Because once they gained power and authority, once they had achieved a critical mass within the institutions of society, women would naturally work for change.

That's what we thought, even if we thought it unconsciously. And the most profound thing I have to say to you today, as a group of brilliant young women poised to enter the world - is that it's just not true.

You can't even argue, in the case of Abu Ghraib, that the problem was that there just weren't ENOUGH women in the military hierarchy to stop the abuses.

The prison was directed by a woman, General Janis Karpinski.

The top US intelligence official in Iraq, who was also responsible for reviewing the status of detainees prior to their release, was a woman, Major Gen. Barbara Fast.

And the US official ultimately responsible for the managing the occupation of Iraq since last October was Condoleezza Rice.

What we have learned, once and for all, is that a uterus is not a substitute for a conscience; menstrual periods are not the foundation of morality.

This does not mean gender equality isn't worth fighting for, for its own sake. It is. And I will keep fighting for it as long as I live.

Gender equality cannot, all alone, bring about a just and peaceful world.

What I have finally come to understand, sadly and irreversibly, is that the kind of feminism based on an assumption of moral superiority on the part of women is a lazy and self-indulgent form of feminism.

Self-indulgent because it assumes that a victory for a woman - whether a diploma, a promotion, a right to serve alongside men in the military - is ipso facto - by its very nature -- a victory for humanity.

And lazy because it assumes that we have only one struggle - the struggle for gender equality - when in fact we have many more. The struggles for peace, for social justice and against imperialist and racist arrogance.... cannot, I am truly sorry to say, be folded into the struggle for gender equality.

Women do not change institutions simply just by assimilating into them. But - and this is the "but" on which all my hopes hinge - a CERTAIN KIND of woman can still do that-- and this is where you come in.

We need a kind of woman who can say NO, not just to the date rapist or overly persistent boyfriend, but to the military or corporate hierarchy within which she finds herself.

We need a kind of woman who doesn't want to be one of the boys when the boys are acting like sadists or fools.

And we need a kind of woman who isn't trying to assimilate, but to infiltrate - and subvert the institutions she goes into.

YOU can be those women. And as the brightest and best-educated women of your generation, you better be.

First, because our nation is in such terrible trouble - hated worldwide, and not just by the fundamentalist fanatics. My version of patriotism is simple: When the powerful no longer act responsibly, then it is our responsibility to take the power away from them.

You have to become tough-minded activists for change because the entire feminist project is also in terrible trouble worldwide. That project, which is minimally about the achievement of equality with men, is threatened by fundamentalisms of all kinds - Christian as well as Islamic.

But we cannot successfully confront that threat without a moral vision that goes beyond gender equality. To cite an old - and far from naïve -- feminist saying: "If you think equality is the goal, your standards are too low."

It is not enough to be equal to men, when the men are acting like beasts.

It is not enough to assimilate. We need to create a world worth assimilating into.

I'm counting on you. I want YOU to be the face of American women that the world sees - not those of Sabrina or Megan or Lynndie or Condoleezza.

Don't let me down. Take your hard-won diplomas, your knowledge and your talents and go out there and RAISE HELL!