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Fatherhood, Gender, and Interventions in the Geopolitical: Analyzing Paternal Peace, Masculinities, and War

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War and peace are gendered and gendering geopolitical processes, constituting particular configurations of masculinity and femininity. When men are considered in relation to war and peace the majority of scholarly accounts focus on soldiers and perpetrators, typically observing their place in the gendered geopolitical solely through military/ized masculinities. In contrast, this article examines fatherhood as a masculine subjectivity, interacting in a nexus with other masculinities to produce an intelligible propeace intervention in war, and considers the implications for our understandings of gender and the geopolitical. To analyze this political subjectivity of what I term “paternal peace,” the article considers the case of Bob Bergdahl. Bergdahl’s son was a US soldier held by a Taliban-aligned group for five years until 2014. During this time Bergdahl was publically critical of US foreign policy, presenting his son’s release as part of a peace process that could end violence in Afghanistan. I unpack how Bergdahl’s public political subjectivity was the outcome of a “gender project” drawing on accounts of “valley” fatherhood in combination with particular forms of diplomatic and military masculinity. I consider how Bergdahl’s intervention was publically received, and how the geopolitical reach of it was pacified within gendered and racialized coding.

This article considers the possibility and practice of what I term “paternal peace” and considers implications for our understandings of gender and the geopolitical. This is explored through the case of Bob Bergdahl, the father of an American soldier held by a Taliban-aligned group for five years. Bergdahl described himself as “a father who wants his son back” (Carroll 2014). His public campaign for his son’s release became inextricably connected to his critiques of American foreign policy, Guantanamo Bay, and direct diplomatic overtures to his son’s captors, which were framed as a chance to end the war in Afghanistan through a peace process.

Men and women populate imaginations of the geopolitical as players in the gendered “universalised storyline of warring” (Baaz and Stern 2009, 496). Men and masculinities are idealized in connection with war’s violence and women and femininities are idealized in relation to peace. Although scholarship has detailed the constructed rather than “natural” form of this configuration, when men are considered in relation to war, it is typically as soldiers, militarized protectors, or perpetrators, and it is explained through the concept of military/ized masculinities. In a departure from this, I reveal the multiple and interacting gendered repertoires through which men encounter, are subject to, and engage in war. I examine how politically unruly engagements in war, peace, and diplomacy can be undertaken through subject positions associated with fatherhood masculinity. I discuss how Bob

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Bergdahl's practices of public political self, and the propeace agenda that was advanced, were a gender project at the nexus of paternal, diplomatic, and militarized masculinities. I consider how this, and efforts by others to make sense of him and his politics, worked both within, and as an unruly disruption of, the gendered and gendering logics of war, peace, and the wider geopolitical.

War, Peace, Gender and the Geopolitical

Gender is a social category (Butler 1990; Connell 1995) produced and reproduced through social practices. Geopolitical processes and practices are gendered and gendering. War, peace, statecraft, and diplomacy (Elshtain 1995 [1987]; Connell 2001; Hooper 2012), for example, are international political spaces defined within the terms, and constitutive, of the multiple femininities and masculinities, and their relational inequalities, that comprise "gender" (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In the case of war and peace, those domains of geopolitics on which this article concentrates, there is a persistent societal association between men, masculinities, and war and between women, femininities, and peacefulness (see Elshtain 1995 [1987], 4; also Goldstein 2003; Baaz and Stern 2009, 499). Baaz and Stern (2009, 496) term this the "universalised storyline of warring," and it is a story that hinges on "honoured ways of being a man" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832).

War and the military endure as sites wherein idealized and privileged forms of masculinity are (re)produced and their "attendant promises and entitlements" (Baaz and Stern 2009, 499; also Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832) described. Militaries reiterate and form "socially dominant ideas about gender" (Brown 2012, 184–85; also Enloe 1983, 13; McFarlane 2014, 4). They "constitute a crucial arena for the construction of masculinity in the larger society" (Hale 2012, 700) because, whilst not in any sense demonstrating "normal" enactments for most men (Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 832; 838), including "military men" (e.g., Baaz and Stern 2009, 499), they delineate "normative" models of manliness in relation to which all men are positioned (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832). The configurations of practice that comprise military masculinities are what Connell (1995) and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) term "hegemonic" because of their normative, exemplifying accounts of masculinity and their stabilization or reconstitution of gendered power asymmetries (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 853).

Peacefulness, on the other hand, is typically linked to particular visions of femininity, which are seen as "antithetical to the military" (Sasson-Levy 2003, 456), war, and violence. Within the gendered geopolitical imaginations and practices of the "storyline of warring" (Baaz and Stern 2009, 496), peaceful, domestically oriented women might be seen to be in need of protection by strong, militarized men (Elshtain 1995 [1987]). Much more radically they could have an intelligible voice in opposing war and militarism through maternal activism (Ruddick [1989] 2002) based on the notion that femininity is intrinsically peaceful and protective (Swerdlow 1993) and women are life-giving rather than life-taking (Steans 2006, 59; Segal 2008, 23; Ahäll 2012, 290).

Academic work has revealed the socially produced rather than inherent or "natural" terms of these associations and subjected them to complication. Revealing a range of military femininities (Sjoberg 2007; Stachowitsch 2013) and women's role in the violent conduct of war (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007), for example, disrupts the neat dualism of warring men and peaceful women (Stachowitsch 2013, 161; Christensen and Rasmussen 2015, 189). The links between men, masculinities, war (and peace) have not been complicated to the same extent as those connecting women to peace, however. As noted at the outset, when men are considered in relation to war, it is typically as soldiers, militarized protectors, or perpetrators. This leaves men as, for example, wartime husbands and fathers "scarcely discussed"

(Christensen and Rasmussen 2015, 196; see partial exceptions Frank 1992; Sasson-Levy 2003; Atherton 2009; Cannen 2014; Gokani, Bogossian, and Akesson 2015). Work on peaceful masculinities, such as antiwar masculinities, has tended to focus on how the hegemonic martial repertoires of military masculinity are reworked and complicated. They examine, for example, the ways that antiwar soldiers intervene politically through masculinity-defining and unimpugnable categories such as “war hero” (Tidy 2015; Stough-Hunter and Hart 2015) or have been politically bounded by charges of deviancy and failed masculinity (Bibbins 2003; Conway 2008).

The category “men in war” is tacitly militarized when we focus so consistently and exclusively on men’s relationship with the military and war’s violences,¹ reproducing hegemonic martial imaginaries and generalizations (see Basham 2016, 263). Doing so also erases the multiple and interacting gendered subjectivities through which people encounter, are subject to, and engage in war in particular and the geopolitical more generally. In this article I undertake a refocusing, analyzing a register of masculinity not hitherto considered in discussions of international politics and war in particular: fatherhood (or paternal) masculinity. I unpack how paternal masculinity interacts with other masculine modes, revealing how the nexus of multiple gendered repertoires through which people encounter and undertake the geopolitical can be an unruly site of political subjectivity and, potentially, political change.

Within this article I conceptualize this nexus through the notion of the “gender project,” developed by Connell (1995, 72), which describes the differing and changeable configurations of practice, “accomplished in social action” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 836), through which gender processes find form in the social world. As gendered social beings, we move between, and practice various forms of, gender and the power relations they entail throughout our lives and in different spaces and contexts in an ongoing “gender project.” These projects may be understood as undertakings of subjectivity, “the varying forms of selfhoods by which people experience and define themselves” so that political selfhood is a product of the social and cultural (Lupton and Barclay 1997, 8; Tidy 2017, 428).

Analyzing the Political Subjectivity of Bob Bergdahl

Robert (Bob) Bergdahl is the father of Bowe Bergdahl,² a US Army private³ held in Afghanistan and Pakistan by a Taliban-aligned group from June 2009 until May 2014. In 2014, the younger Bergdahl was exchanged for five Guantanamo detainees by the Obama administration and returned to the United States. The exchange was domestically contentious, with intense media conjecture surrounding the circumstances of Bowe’s capture in Afghanistan. Following his release, he was charged with desertion and misbehavior before the enemy under the Uniform Code of Military Justice and, as of the time of writing, awaits a court-martial. During Bowe’s captivity, Bob, a former champion cyclist and retired UPS deliveryman living with his family on a ranch near Hailey in the Sun Valley in Idaho, undertook a high profile public campaign for his son’s release. Bob Bergdahl described himself as “a father who wants his son back” (Carroll 2014). To this end he urged the US government to stand by the principle of “no man left behind” as a campaigner within the Honor-Release-Return and Rolling Thunder POW repatriation groups. He addressed his son and his son’s captors in speeches, via Twitter, and in a video message he uploaded to YouTube, often speaking the Pashto he had learned since his son’s detention. He was critical of the United States’ war in Afghanistan, its wider foreign

¹Whether as soldiers, those who refuse to be soldiers (i.e., conscientious objectors), private military security contractors, etc.

²When I refer to “Bergdahl” in this article I mean Robert (Bob) Bergdahl.

³Promoted during his captivity to Sergeant.

policy and the detention without trial of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. He called for an end to the war, drew comparisons between the people of Afghanistan and those who lived in the mountains of Idaho, and talked of drawing inspiration from Martin Luther King's anti-Vietnam War sermons. Campaigning for his son's release was bound up with propeace interventions in the macro-geopolitical processes of war, peace, and diplomacy. Bergdahl presented the release of Bowe as a key part of a peace process that would help end violence in Afghanistan. He presented an alternative storyline of warring.

I approach this case through a discursive "reading" of two sets of texts. First, those that relate to the gender project that was Bergdahl's public practice of selfhood. Secondly those that relate to the reception of this gender project within mainstream public discourse. Paying attention to how Bergdahl publicly presented himself *and* how that presentation was made intelligible by others allows me to explore how Bergdahl's intervention was placed within a broader context of societal understandings about masculinity, war, and peace and was variously—and simultaneously—unruly and pacified within those terms. To analyze Bergdahl's self-presentation, I worked with the following texts: his Twitter feed; a video uploaded to YouTube in 2011 in which he addresses the Pakistan government and those holding his son; videos of speeches he gave at an Honor-Release-Return rally in Washington, DC, in 2013, at a Bring Bowe Back rally in Hailey, Idaho, in 2013, at press conferences in Gowen Field, Idaho, and in the Whitehouse Rose Garden in 2014; and a filmed interview Bergdahl gave to the *Guardian*, which was released in 2014 (Carroll 2014). These texts provide snapshots of the ways in which Bergdahl performed the gender project underpinning his propeace political intervention. These "ways" of undertaking gendered selfhood include a full range of discursive practices including how Bergdahl spoke, who he spoke to, in what language he spoke, the topics he spoke on, the ways in which he dressed, and the spaces in which he was publicly visible.

To arrive at a sample of texts relating to the reception of Bergdahl's intervention, I analyzed news articles, programming and commentary from three mainstream news outlets: Fox News, MSNBC, and the *Washington Post*. These outlets were chosen to provide snapshots of the gendered repertoires that were drawn upon within mainstream public discourse to make sense of Bergdahl. Taken together, they represent positions across the American political spectrum. Fox News is known for its right-leaning pro-Republican stance, with MSNBC often seen as its left-Democratic counterpart. The *Washington Post* was chosen because it is a high-profile newspaper publishing a range of opinion from commentators across the mainstream political spectrum. In order to narrow the selection to a pragmatically manageable sample that allowed for some comparative "reading," I focused on the reaction within these three outlets to a single public appearance by Bob Bergdahl, the Whitehouse Rose Garden press conference. The appearance generated a high volume of reportage and commentary across the three outlets in a short period of time and crystallized the main themes of media reaction to Bergdahl.⁴

The discursive "reading" of these texts was grounded in the techniques of discourse theory, which involves the analysis of "empirical raw materials and information as discursive forms" to reveal the ways in which social practices articulate and contest the discourses productive of the social (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 3–4; Howarth 2000). In practical terms the reading of the texts involved an initial immersion to identify tropes, themes, and narratives within them, with their varying reiterative or disruptive productive effect on the discursive forms producing social, geopolitical realities. For example, media representations of Bob Bergdahl focused obsessively on his bushy beard (grown over the years that Bowe was held), coding

⁴ Bowe Bergdahl and the Bergdahl family were regularly denounced as traitors by Donald Trump during his presidential campaign. This occurred after the research for this article was conducted and falls outside of the timeframe analyzed here. However, the place of the Bergdahl case within Trump's politics is deserving of future analysis.

it variously as an indication of sympathy with the Taliban, a secret conversion to Islam, a strategic attempt to appear sympathetic to his son's captors, and Stockholm syndrome by proxy. The coding of Bergdahl in these ways operated within the discursive formations that delineate appropriate (and inappropriate) ways to, amongst other things, "do" fatherhood and masculinity and the simultaneous production of the multiple selves and others that underpin war (Der Derian 2009, 238). As this brief example suggests, the terms on which appropriate and inappropriate paternal masculinity were delineated were in part configured within racialized codings. It is therefore necessary to understand how Bergdahl's gender project was also, simultaneously, a race project in which racialized selves and others were enacted, troubled, and reinstated. Although gender is the main focus of this article, I recognize the intersectional (Crenshaw 1991) operation of gendered power and therefore unpack the political significance of how these discursive formations were concerned with masculinities racialized in particular ways. This included the construction of competing imaginations of American masculine whiteness (see, for example, Guess 2006) and competing imaginations of Afghan, and broader Muslim, masculinity (see Puar 2007; Maira 2009).

It is worth observing that "reading"—a process of simultaneously "writing" intelligibility into the empirics—can risk being a pacifying move, one in which the researcher identifies neat delineations separating those different iterations of masculinity, which allow particular political moves to be accomplished within the gender project. This might obscure the spontaneity of the political subjectivity being written about, which is a complex field of complicity, contradiction, and rupture. Particular versions of masculinity do not "stand out as a sharply defined pattern," rather there is "overlap or blurring" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 839) with mismatches, tensions, and resistances (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 841). Through thinking of the political productivity at a nexus of different registers of masculinity, a shifting repertoire in process, it has been my intention and hope to illuminate those overlaps without resolving and closing off their messiness and inconsistencies.

Paternal Peace

As a category, women—and particularly those who are visibly mothers—are seen as having a valid perspective on peace by virtue of their association with life-giving (Steans 2006, 59), although this perspective can be politically bounded (Shigematsu 2009, 416; Tidy 2017). In the case of high-profile US peace campaigner Cindy Sheehan, for example, being the mother of a soldier son killed in Iraq was a position through which to "craft a maternal politics of peace" (Knudson 2009, 164) that refigured maternal "heartache" into "activism" as a "peace mom" (Sheehan 2006). Feminine and maternal antiwar political intervention may still draw on masculine repertoires of authority, such as military masculinity (Tidy 2015), but the initial premise of women taking a peaceful stance is easily accommodated within, and indeed limited by, the terms and discursive form that established understandings of gender, war, and peace take. In a contemporary context, men are often seen as having a valid perspective on peace through their direct (and masculinity affirming) involvement in war, typically as heroic soldier citizens who return from fighting with uncomfortable truths to tell the nation (Leitz 2014; Rowe 2013; Tidy 2015). Men who are the fathers of soldiers are not unheard of within contemporary American propeace politics (typically as part of a military family peace organization such as Military Families Speak Out), although protest associated with mothers has been much more visible and organized (Managhan 2011, 442), through groups such as Gold Star Mothers for Peace and Code Pink.

Outside of both of these repertoires, Bergdahl's political intervention was grounded instead in an iteration of fatherhood that I term the "valley father."

Fatherhood “is a phenomenon around which there currently exist many and often competing discourses” (Lupton and Barclay 1997, 9; 13; and see LaRossa 1997; Gavanas 2004; Podnieks 2016). It can be a key signifier of more hegemonic forms of masculinity: demonstrative of heterosexuality and formations of gendered power asymmetry within the family and household (Skelton and Valentine 2005, 194). But it has also been argued that there has been an uneven shift in culture and conduct (Skelton and Valentine 2005, 195; also Lupton and Barclay 1997, 14) toward more “nurturant” models of fatherhood that map less straightforwardly onto hegemonic modes of masculinity (Daly 1995, 22). As Lupton and Barclay (1997, 3) observe, fatherhood is key to understanding the production of, and plurality within, masculinity. In the case of Bob Bergdahl, fatherhood was a basis for a public self that could, as a function of overlap with other masculine modes, legibly extend from, and link, the local to the international. Bergdahl’s “valley fatherhood,” located in a nexus with military and diplomatic masculinities, underpinned his political subjectivity of “paternal peace.”

The starting point of the public selfhood of Bergdahl as a “valley father” was a focus on family and, specifically, on Bowe. Bergdahl performed the role of family spokesman (typically referring to “we” and “our family”), educator (he and his wife had home-schooled their two children), spiritual guide, moral and ethical compass, and advocate for his son’s reputation (see, for example, Bring Bowe Home speech 2013; Honor-Release-Return Rally speech 2013; Carroll 2014). This fatherly commitment to a child was a node from which other things, including a political agenda, could flow, tied to the underlying paternal impulse to reunite with a lost son and make the family whole again. Bergdahl told the *Guardian* (Carroll 2014):

I don’t work for the military. I don’t work for the government. I don’t represent the American people. I’m a father who wants his son back . . . I wake up each morning and my son is still a POW in Afghanistan and I need to do something about that . . . every day you just carry this empty unsatisfied place in your heart. Every day.

Doing something about his son’s captivity was, therefore, a paternal onus and also a paternal capability. Rather than waiting for the military or government to rescue his son, Bergdahl set about it himself.

In Bergdahl’s narrative the toughness and self-reliance of those who live in the mountains and valleys was emphasized. Bergdahl was not simply a father; he was a *valley father*. When Bergdahl addressed the camera for a video message released on YouTube in May 2011, he did so with the snowy hills of the Sun Valley rising in the background. He made repeated references in speeches to the valley, particularly the character of valley people, their toughness and endurance. In his video interview with *Guardian*, he was filmed hiking into the snowy aspen forest to a camp he had built there for Bowe (Carroll 2014). The video shows him chopping wood, lighting a fire, riding a horse bareback, and carefully carrying a gun. At the press conference in Idaho after Bowe’s release, Bergdahl noted the toughness of the valley people:

The mountain desert environment breeds tough people. People who know how to farm here and make a living and it’s hard and it makes you tough. If it doesn’t kill you it makes you tougher.

The valley father embodies something of the frontier spirit: masculinity defined by toughness in a wilderness setting, resourcefulness, and not relying on anyone but yourself (Miller 2004, 61; see also Connell 1993; Anahita and Mix 2006) and perhaps your valley community. Frontier masculinity is a white masculinity, enacting mythologized visions of colonial, settler whiteness (Butterworth 2007). Bergdahl’s tenacity in seeking his son’s release was expressed as a function of his valley character, drawing on the repertoires of traditional frontier masculinity, but one softened by a nurturant (Daly 1995, 22) style of fatherhood that also signaled Bergdahl as a civilizing bastion in the untamed wilds of Idaho. In the *Guardian* interview, Bergdahl

talks of the “unsatisfied place” in his heart as he yearns for his missing son. As well as being shown hiking into the snowy hills, he is depicted in the same video poring over books. Bergdahl publicly exhibited an emotional literacy as well as a form of educative intellectualism. He presented as a man who could fondly teach his children to light a fire in the snow of the frontier and give them a lecture about the philosophical foundations of the American constitution whilst he did so.

Other possible repertoires of masculinity were downplayed. Bergdahl had once been a high-level athlete, a cyclist who made the US Olympic team. Bergdahl made one indirect reference to this in the texts that I analyzed, saying of the campaign for his son’s release “you’ve got to dig in; it’s an endurance sport” (Honor-Release-Return Rally speech 2013). The athlete narrative would have entailed its own particular notion of masculinity and of American character, but instead Bergdahl emphasized humble, blue-collar jobs (“I worked for UPS for 28 years”—Carroll 2014) as part of his family-oriented life in the Sun Valley. As I explore next, the emphasis on family provided the material to focus on perceived commonalities with particular Afghan lives and masculinities.

Bergdahl’s position as patriarch within his family was the basis for practices of diplomatic masculinity and the production of a wider political role. As Christensen and Ferree (2008, 299–300) identify, within antiwar discourse, a diplomatic masculinity—characterized by being “civilized,” and exhibiting a “sophisticated, nuanced language of diplomacy”—is valued. Through the practice of a diplomatic masculinity that emphasized these modes of political engagement, Bergdahl could intervene politically as a sort of community elder who not only protected his own family and his own valley but, through these roles, had a wider part to play in the forging of a peace with, and in, Afghanistan. Bergdahl’s public selfhood was grounded in the notion that he was a self-reliant valley father doing something about the captivity of his son rather than waiting for the state to live up to its obligations. Concern for the son became bound up in concern for the war that took him to Afghanistan, the geopolitical processes that the war was a part of, and an international project of peace. Bergdahl presented as the valley father who, through his son, found himself engaged in an international effort of propeace diplomacy. The widening of Bergdahl’s area of legible intervention outside of the valley and beyond (and yet inextricably bound with) his son involved the practice of a form of diplomatic masculinity through which the role of local family spokesperson and ambassador could be transfigured into that of international peace advocate.

The first element of the diplomatic masculinity practiced by Bergdahl was a sartorial self-presentation that signaled the alikeness between, rather than differences dividing, the valley fathers of Afghanistan and the United States. He often, as in the 2011 video message and at the 2014 post-release press conference in Idaho, wore a long-line high collared black shirt. Bergdahl’s beard was long and untrimmed. Bergdahl’s dress and physical presentation operated as a visual metaphor for his contention that the people of the American mountains and the Afghan mountains are “a lot alike” (Gowen Field Press Conference 2014) and also (uncomfortably for many audiences, as discussed below) problematized the common visual grammars that are utilized to divide “self” from “other.” Bergdahl’s beard evoked mountaineers and a life on the American frontier. When riding through Hailey on his motorcycle for a Bring Bowe Home rally, Bergdahl looked like any other member of the Rolling Thunder bikers with their black clothes and abundant facial hair. But those same visual cues—the beard and what could be made intelligible as “traditional clothing”—are “associated with Arabness or Islam” (Naber 2014, 1112). Bergdahl seemed to be accommodating visual grammars of selfhood that could be intelligible to dual audiences and, in doing so, unsettling assumptions about the fundamental duality of those audiences.

A second element of Bergdahl’s practice of diplomatic masculinity was the use of particular styles of language (see Christensen and Ferree 2008, 299–300) that

emphasized the mutual interests of his family, Afghanistan, and the Taliban regime. This was typically formal and unemotional and, at times, including at the Whitehouse Rose Garden press conference, Bergdahl spoke in Pashto and Arabic. In the 2011 video he released on YouTube, Bergdahl addressed portions of the Pakistan military operating in the tribal regions, his son's captors, and the Taliban (using their preferred moniker, the Islamic Emirate). With his back to the snowy hills he spoke direct to the camera, formally and in a measured tone. He addressed generals by name, as well as armies and entire nations ("the people of Pakistan"). Speaking for his family, Bergdahl said, "we understand the rationale the Islamic Emirate has made through its videos," and he noted that "no family in the United States understands the detainee issue [Guantanamo Bay] like ours. Our son's safe return will only heighten the public awareness of this" (Bergdahl 2011; also Carroll 2014). Bergdahl was performing the selfhood of the valley father who finds himself—and crucially has the skills to be—involved in international diplomacy, emphasizing rational and mutually beneficial outcomes.

In texts addressing his son's captors, the more emotional lexicon of fatherly concern expressed in the *Guardian* interview is replaced by the formal language of international negotiation. Bergdahl emphasized his active (and seemingly single-handed) role in the negotiations to swap Bowe for Guantanamo detainees, a continuity with the self-reliant valley father who gets on with doing something about the situation when the state is unwilling or unable. "I am still working to free captives on all sides of this conflict," he tweeted in May 2014. The portrayal of an active involvement in the freeing of Guantanamo's detainees was coupled with a vociferous critique of the United States' treatment of those prisoners. He asked at an Honor-Release-Return rally in 2013, "How did the Hanoi Hilton get moved to Guantanamo Bay?"

Within the diplomatic narrative, the Bergdahl father and son were framed as being key to a critique of, and the end to, the war in Afghanistan. Rather than an end to the war being the catalyst for Bowe's release, it was presented as being the other way around. Bowe's presence in Afghanistan, his eventual release, and Bob Bergdahl's role in brokering it were integral to an effective peace process. At a Bring Bowe Back rally in 2013, Bergdahl addressed his son:

Bowe, my son . . . you are part of the peace process. You are part of ending the Afghan war, like we have known for some time. Have faith; do good works; continue to tell the truth.

Bergdahl was simultaneously the guiding valley father who urged his son to "tell the truth," "do good works," and "have faith" but also the international peace broker who could help fulfil his son's potential as a catalyst for peace. After Bowe's release, and speaking at a military-organized press conference in Idaho, Bergdahl addressed his son again:

I am so proud of your cultural abilities and your language skills . . . your drive and action to serve this country in a very difficult long war but most of all I'm proud of how much you wanted to help the Afghan people and how much you were willing to do to go to that length . . . and I think you have succeeded.

Rather than emphasizing Bowe's prowess as a combatant, fighting a war through violent means, Bergdahl lauded those traits that map onto particular imaginations of war-as-peacekeeping. In the iteration of it he presents, war can be tamed and peace advanced through the placement of diplomatic masculinity into a martial setting, producing a form of peacekeeping masculinity (see Duncanson 2009). Bowe reportedly joined the military expecting it to be "a kind of peace corps with guns" (Bumiller 2012), and it is this vision of military service that Bergdahl emphasizes, even as he alludes to the "very difficult long war." Bergdahl presents a well-established vision of war-as-peacekeeping in which the Afghan people were to be

“helped” (and as a consequence feminized—see [Razack 2004](#); [Whitworth 2004](#)) by a man of “drive” and “action,” albeit one who could call upon his cultural understanding and facilitate diplomatic engagement through his language skills. Bergdahl linked these traits in Bowe back to his own effective fathering. In his *Guardian* interview, Bergdahl had described Bowe’s motivations for going to Afghanistan as being grounded in “compassion,” something that he had because of “the way he was raised” ([Carroll 2014](#)). Bergdahl’s characterization of the war in Afghanistan in the quote above can be read as eliding its violence with a revisionist allusion to helping the Afghan people. However, the statement is less about the realities of the “very difficult long war” and more about Bowe’s actions within it. These were supposedly out of step with the flawed US military policy and practice that had contributed to the difficulty and length of the war. Bowe’s embodiment of compassion, cultural awareness, and openness could now, however, through his detention and release, bring about the realization of his propeace agenda. In this framing, the ethics of compassion and care instilled by the valley father had, through the vector of his son, taken on an international and potentially war-ending significance that could stand against and moderate a rampant and unreconstructed American military masculinity and its attendant ways of “doing” conflict. Entailed in Bergdahl’s intervention was, therefore, a commentary on what masculine values should, and should not, have a place in the geopolitical arena and a vision of how war and peace could and should be. This can be read as a rival normative account of the best and better way to be a man (see [Connell and Messerschmidt 2005](#), 845).

In summary, the overlapping “repertoires in process” of paternal (valley father) and diplomatic masculinities provided a mode for the advancement of propeace discourses of cultural commonality, tolerance, and understanding and alternative normative accounts of manliness, including in a war setting. Through his position as a father, Bergdahl seemed not to merely access a valid perspective and critique on war (stating, for example, “[t]he purpose of war is to destroy things. You can’t use that to govern”—[Carroll 2014](#)) but also—drawing on diplomatic modes of selfhood—he was apparently able to speak “man to man” with the Taliban and actively engineer the peace process and the prisoner swap that would free his son (“Wars end with reconciliation and negotiation with the enemy and POWs should be part of this dialogue and *I insist* that it will be”—[Carroll 2014](#)). Finally, transferred from father to son, Bergdahl’s compassionate, diplomatic masculinity could refigure military service into something more closely resembling the Peace Corps.

The third key masculine subjectivity at work in the paternal peace nexus was militarized masculinity. Militarized masculine repertoires overlapped with those of the valley father to emphasize positive and nonmilitary commonalities between the Afghans and Americans rather than “enemy otherness.” Tropes of military masculinity, such as invocations of Bowe’s military identity, affirmative claims concerning the military, and militarized language were a surprisingly minor and qualified aspect of Bergdahl’s public practice of selfhood and political intervention. “Surprising” due to the unparalleled position of authority that the military enjoys within US culture and politics and the readily available political repertoires and organizational structures of the veterans’ and military families’ advocacy and antiwar movements. As described earlier in this article, the soldier as a locus of uncomfortable, and authoritative, truths about war is a well-established political trope. Military masculinities do not simply reside and map onto military men, their bodies, and practices, rather they are a socially privileged hegemonic “set of beliefs, practices and attributes that can enable individuals—men and women—to claim authority on the basis of affirmative relationships with the military or with military ideas” ([Belkin 2012](#), 3). Bergdahl’s affirmative relationship with the military in the shape of his soldier son was therefore a readily available and established mode for political intervention, drawing on military identities and authority to intervene politically ([Leitz 2014](#)).

Bergdahl tended to present himself not as a military father, however, but as a valley father, at the head of an Idaho valley family rather than a military family. Bergdahl often wore the POW-MIA logo, sometimes noted his son's military identity, and re-tweeted Memorial Day memes. However, the most strongly military-affirmative moment in the texts was Bergdahl's speech at a military-organized press conference at the Army National Guard base at Gowen Field in Boise, Idaho immediately after Bowe's release. Bergdahl thanked those in the military and government (whom he had previously publicly criticized) for their role in his son's release. He noted that some of the military liaison team had "become like family" and they and his family were on "first name terms." One way to understand the event is as a moment in which militarized fatherhood came to the fore in Bergdahl's "gender project." However, some of his practices of selfhood at the press conference can be read as a move to civilianize the military rather than militarize the Bergdahls. The discourse of the Bergdahls as primarily a valley family, and the link that this gave them to the imagined valley families of Afghanistan, was not displaced. For example (and as quoted in part earlier) Bergdahl stated:

We're so much like Afghanistan. I wish I could write a book about that. Our character is a lot alike. The mountain desert environment breeds tough people. People who know how to farm here and make a living and its hard and it makes you tough. If it doesn't kill you it makes you tougher.

Rather than the Bergdahls being or becoming a military family, this part of the speech suggests that those individual military personnel who have entered the Bergdahls' circle of trust and with whom they have come to be on first name terms have joined the valley family (or, as Jani Bergdahl put it at the same event, valley "tribe"). The emphasis was placed upon individuals and their familial, rather than military-institutional, connections. The propeace narrative of underscoring similarities rather than differences between the United States (or rather, a particular imagined United States) and (a particular imagined) Afghanistan was reiterated. According to this account, Bergdahl's valley family, which now encompassed the military personnel who worked to free Bowe, shared a commonality of character and experience with the Afghan people. This closed the gap between the Afghan "other" and the American military "self" defined by the logics of war. In this way, the subjectivity of the peaceful elder, the valley father, forging familial bonds across the divisions of conflict could supposedly accommodate the seemingly opposing sides in the Afghan war.

Another example of an unruly engagement with military masculinity is to be found in Bergdahl's speech at a Bring Bowe Home Rolling Thunder rally in the Bergdahl's hometown in 2013. He said:

A father does not leave his son alone on the battlefield. I do not live here. I live in Afghanistan. My cell phone is set to Afghan time. My weather is Afghan weather. I might be standing here but I am living vicariously through my son. I will not leave you on the battlefield Bowe.

Unlike the military mothers such as Cindy Sheehan, whose loss of a soldier child is seen to bring war into the domestic sphere (Tidy 2015, 460), in Bergdahl's account the father is transported to the battlefield from where the war and the region become visible. Bowe's status as a warrior on the battlefield is invoked, and Bob assumes a warrior identity of his own, a tough valley patriarch who could handle himself on the battlefield if, for his son, he needed to. But this metaphorical living "in Afghanistan" is presented less as a narrative of potential Rambo-esque POW recovery and more as an entry point for diplomatic empathy, forging an understanding of and with the people of the Afghan region whose "suffering" has been made visible "through the presence of our son in your midst" (Bergdahl 2011). Therefore, although public affirmations of the military, the wearing of POW-MIA

clothing, and references to Bowe's soldierly identity all drew on repertoires of military masculinity, in a nexus with the discourse of valley fatherhood and propeace diplomacy, they produced a mode of "paternal peace" that at times emphasized commonalities with, and empathy for, the Afghan "enemy." This troubled the notion that a military identity is the only, and—crucially—the best, identity that a soldier or a family can have. The Gowen Field press conference, for example, was a reminder that militariness is not necessarily the dominant organizing principle in the lives of military families (see [Krebs 2004](#)).

Through a reading of the public political selfhood of Bob Bergdahl, I have argued that the mode of paternal peace that underpinned his intervention was an outcome of how valley fatherhood, diplomatic masculinity, and military masculinity overlapped and interacted in the process of this "gender project." Bergdahl's propeace gender project drew on various ways of being a man and, particularly, a father. Accounts of valley fatherhood allowed for connections to be made between the local and the international, "selves" and "others." These practices of self were variously confirming of, and an unruly intervention within, the gendered configurations of war, peace, and diplomacy, the gendered storyline of warring. War and the international brokering of peace remained the concern primarily of older men speaking rationally to other older men. In this sense, and using [Connell and Messerschmidt's terms](#) (2005, 853), the intervention was in part a reconstitution of hegemonic masculinity. It is worth noting, however, that some of those men were Afghan or Pakistani men with globally subordinated masculinities and Bergdahl was publicly addressing them in diplomatic terms at a time when overtures toward the Taliban were a practice and a possibility that most Western politicians refused to acknowledge. Bergdahl's intervention, framed as that of a traditional family patriarch, confirmed the privilege of particular forms of fatherhood, their attendant masculinities, and entailed notions of the heteronormative family. Furthermore, at the nexus of paternal, diplomatic, and military masculinities, Bergdahl could legibly inhabit mutually sustaining positions of self-reliant, wise, and compassionate father and peace-brokering diplomat, a unification of the personal, domestic, and geopolitical that is typically denied to women (see for example [Shigematsu 2009](#), 416; [Millar 2015](#)) within the storyline of warring. However, an emphasis on fatherhood *did* open up a political space for propeace political intervention. This occurred through an emphasis on commonalities between particular imaginations of American and Afghan selfhood and by contesting the notion, through the advancement of a peaceful but strong valley masculinity, that the military was the finest iteration of manly selfhood, and family citizenship, available.

Pacifying Paternal Peace

In this part I discuss how Bob Bergdahl's public political selfhood was made intelligible by the mainstream media. I examine how Bergdahl's unruliness was pacified within a neatened restatement of particular aspects of the gendered storyline of war. This smoothed out points of rupture or overlap. Bergdahl was rendered as either a bad militarized father when associated with the Taliban (he was effectively coded as a dangerous, racialized enemy other) or a "good" (and securely "white") militarized father when associated with his soldier son. Responses to Bergdahl were a gender project that operated within the discursive formations that delineate (in)appropriate ways to be a father and a man in "wartime" and map these onto imaginaries concerning the various "selves" and "others" that underpin broader geopolitical boundaries and processes.

I focus on the public debate surrounding the appearance by Bergdahl in the Rose Garden of the Whitehouse alongside Jani Bergdahl and Barack Obama for a press conference marking Bowe's release. As one *Washington Post* commentator put it, "Rose Garden ceremonies should be safe and predictable. This one wasn't"

(Robinson 2014). Bearded Bergdahl wore a white high-necked shirt, spoke the Arabic blessing *bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim*, and then addressed his still absent son in Pashto. The appearance resulted in a media furor that coincided with, and formed part of, the wider media speculation concerning Bowe Bergdahl and the circumstances of his capture in Afghanistan and release in a prisoner exchange.

Media discussions of the Rose Garden appearance and Bob Bergdahl tended to fall into one of two positions, both attempts to solve the problem of Bergdahl's unsafeness and unpredictability. The first was epitomized by Fox News's Bill O'Reilly, who said of Bergdahl, "he looks like a Muslim!" (Fox News 2014a). This view, echoed with varying degrees of subtlety across news media, framed Bergdahl as dangerous, aberrant, un-American, and a bad father through his association with a dangerous, racialized, masculinity of violent Muslim "otherness." In this rendering, the problem was solved by racially coding Bergdahl as "other." More sympathetic reportage and commentary, in contrast, emphasized Bergdahl's good fatherhood and drew on military affirmative repertoires grounded in military masculinity to suggest that a soldier's family should not be scrutinized, epitomized by Chuck Todd's warning, "Don't criticize the parents Joe," during an edition of Joe Scarborough's MSNBC talk show *Morning Joe* (MSNBC 2014a). This latter perspective tended to focus on "making allowances" for Bergdahl and securing his whiteness rather than engaging with his political position. As such, public dialogue was for the most part caught between two dichotomous frameworks of intelligibility built on militarized understandings of men in war and differentiated by how Bergdahl was racially coded.

Reaction to Bergdahl's Rose Garden appearance focused overwhelmingly on his beard and on his use of what one report termed "the foreign language" (Fox News 2014b). The *Washington Post* noted that in the Rose Garden:

Robert Bergdahl's bushy blond beard was hard to ignore. The fists of facial hair gave a cleric's appearance to the former UPS driver from Idaho. (Frankel 2014)

In the myriad references to Bergdahl's "full beard" (Fox News 2015) across the texts, this element of his public practice of selfhood becomes shorthand for his association with a Muslim "other," understood in violent terms. Writing in the *Washington Post*, Kathleen Parker (2014) noted the "strange and creepy" visual similarity between the "five bearded detainees" that had been exchanged for Bowe Bergdahl and his father, "bearded and speaking Arabic and Pashto." The use of the blessing *bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim* was described and interpreted variously as a "chant" (Fox News 2014b), a "war cry of Allah" (see Wemple 2014), and the more generic "language of the Taliban" (Fox News 2014a). Bergdahl's beard and use of "the foreign language" (Fox News 2014b) were therefore understood as violent and threatening. His use of the Arabic blessing was termed a "war" or "victory" "cry," and he was associated with the detainees swapped for his son. In some cases, it was posited that Bergdahl had secretly converted to Islam (Parker 2014), something understood as violent and threatening rather than peaceful. Assumptions about men's "naturally" warlike propensities were coupled with assumptions about the violent tendencies of *particular* men, identified through racial codings. The coding of Bergdahl as a man of racialized "otherness" (unpredictable, irrational, violent, dishonorable, and secretive) meant that a violent agenda became a more intelligible explanation for his Arabic language skills than, for example, peaceful diplomacy and postconflict reconciliation.

Following the Rose Garden appearance, Bergdahl's abilities as a father were questioned. Although it had been in the public domain since 2012, an email sent by Bergdahl to his son advising him to "obey" his "conscience" when doubting the mission in Afghanistan (Hastings 2012) was, in the eyes of many, cast in a new light. Bowe's alleged desertion was, in some examples, linked with the failure of Bob Bergdahl's effective fathering (Fox News 2014c). As Joe Scarborough put it on *Good Morning Joe*, "I am a father. Any good father would not tell their son to follow

their conscience and leave men and women on the line” (MSNBC 2014a). In this framing, Bergdahl’s aberrant fathering not only distances him from an affirmative association with the military and its ideals (and therefore undermines the authority that this could have accorded him) but his poor parenting has also compromised the ideals of military masculinity evidenced by the supposed desertion of his son.

In contrast, and often in direct conflict with the above narrative, were those reports and commentaries that drew on the unimpugnable position of American military families to call for Bergdahl to be “cut some slack” (Kurtz 2014) or to be left out of what were identified as “big P,” politically motivated debates (MSNBC 2014b). This position was expressed by Lauren Ashburn, who said in response to Bill O’Reilly “It’s inappropriate that you . . . are attacking a man whose son has been held in captivity for five years” (Fox 2014d). In the wake of the Rose Garden press conference, other texts, such as a *Washington Post* feature, sought to explain what was termed the “curious, even troubling” appearance and behavior of Bergdahl (Frankel 2014), in ways which secured his whiteness. Responses such as this operated within the same common sense that explicitly hostile reactions did, working with the assumption that Bergdahl’s behavior was somehow aberrant and, if not outrightly condemned, must at least be in some way accounted for. Frankel’s (2014) *Washington Post* piece mooted the possibility of “some form of the captive-bonding Stockholm syndrome” to explain Bergdahl’s behavior. Ultimately, the article emphasized the narrative of a desperate father doing whatever it took to get his son home. Bergdahl’s beard, new language skills, and hunger to learn about the “foreign world that held his son” were the actions of a man “just trying to understand his son’s captors, doing whatever he could to ensure his son’s release.”

These seemingly more supportive accounts take an affirmative position regarding the military. Bergdahl was seen as either beyond criticism because he was the father of a POW (whatever the circumstances) or it was suggested that some allowances should be made for his “troubling” behaviors in the context of his desperation to bring his soldier son home. Both formulations position Bergdahl’s as an ancillary masculinity to that of his referent son and someone whose actions should not be understood in political terms. This pacified Bergdahl’s unsettling, unavoidably political, unruliness. Phrases such as that in the *Washington Post* feature discussed above, which describe how Bergdahl was “just trying to understand his son’s captors” (emphasis added), strip out a propeace political agenda. By implication, if it turned out to be the case that Bergdahl was not “just” trying to save his son but was also simultaneously intervening in international politics, those who find him “troubling” may have a point.

In contrast to those that viewed him as a threatening enemy “other” and inadequate father, the more sympathetic responses emphasized Bergdahl’s good fatherhood and notions of family. In some texts, Bergdahl was such a devoted father that he was willing to enter the troubling world of the “other,” and imperil his white masculinity, to protect his son. Some commentators did challenge the racialized framings of Bergdahl’s beard, wryly noting the similarities between Bergdahl’s facial hair and that of the stars of American reality show *Duck Dynasty*.⁵ Making the point that Bergdahl looked, after all, like a white all-American man from Louisiana skirted around, however, the unsettling intervention at the heart of his political subjecthood: Bergdahl could look *simultaneously* like a “cleric” and a duck hunter from the Deep South and that was the point.

The more critical coverage of Bergdahl stripped out his propeace political interventions by coding him within the terms of the violent racialized masculinity of the “other.” The more sympathetic coverage of Bergdahl also worked to confound the political unruliness of his public practices of selfhood, in part by protecting

⁵The show follows the Robertsons, a Christian family from Louisiana who run a business selling duck hunting paraphernalia. See, for example, MSNBC (2014b).

the whiteness of his masculinity. The political subjecthood located at the nexus of overlapping and interacting repertoires of masculinity and race was replaced with a somewhat unelaborated military-familial cipher, existent in the political landscape as a locus of (white) American virtue through the terms of his son's military identity. Viewing Bergdahl only as an extension of his soldier son obstructed his traction on a broader-ranging intervention and critique. Indeed, Bergdahl was presented as a bastion of the nonpolitical that must be protected. Bergdahl's interventions were seen as fundamentally apolitical because they were understood as the domestically bounded actions of someone who was only a "good father" and who would do anything (including growing a beard and learning a foreign language) to reunite his military family. Such a father could be the leader and guardian of his heteronormatively imagined military family but could not assume a leadership role in international propeace advocacy.

Conclusion

The objective of this article was to move beyond the typical treatment of the category "men in war" that locates their involvement within the terms of their military role or conduct of violence. Instead, I sought to reveal some of the multiple and interacting gendered repertoires through which men encounter, are subject to, and engage in war in particular and the geopolitical more generally, including through propeace political projects. I then considered the pacifying challenges that such projects might face.

Using the case of Bob Bergdahl, I argued that fatherhood, in combination with other masculine modes, can be a subjecthood through which to open up space for a propeace intervention that is at times far reaching and enables the familial and domestic to be linked to the international and geopolitical in a unified, intelligible manner. Such a unified political selfhood (Millar 2015) is often denied to women and femininities in propeace interventions. In part, the political possibilities of paternal peace derive from the ease with which men (or rather, particular men) are able to move between and within different, often powerful, masculine positionalities, a facet of the unequal gendered power hierarchy. Bob Bergdahl could plausibly practice the masculine positions of "valley father" and "international propeace diplomat," a fluidity and legibility of political selfhood not readily available to women (Shigematsu 2009, 416). The intervention was therefore variously unruly and confirming of the prevailing power relations entailed in the "universalised storyline of warring" (Baaz and Stern 2009, 496).

Whilst Bergdahl's public political gender project could unsettle the regularized narratives of gender and war, it could also be, and was, pacified within these terms. This, in particular, reproduced the privileging of particular masculinities as legible modes for specific kinds of wartime political intervention. Afghan men were viewed within the media responses to Bergdahl as dangerous and savage, such that his diplomatic engagement with them was rendered unintelligible and he was coded as violent within racialized terms. In understanding the dynamics and possibilities of peaceful masculinities, therefore, attention also needs to be paid to intersecting terms of privilege and subordination within the social ordering of war.

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