

Military masculinity in the media: moving on from Rambo

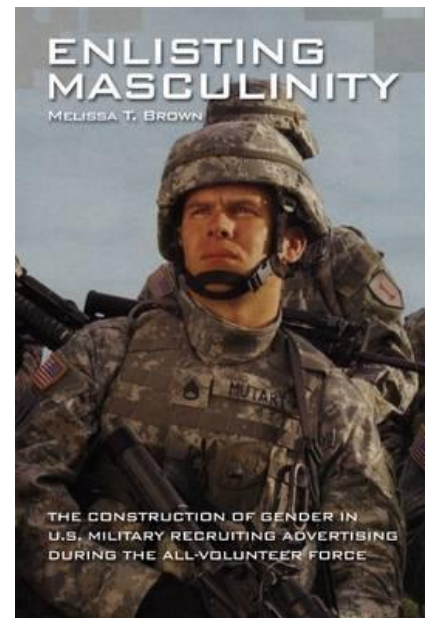
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***Enlisting Masculinity** explores how the U.S. military branches have deployed ideas about masculinity to sell military service to potential recruits. Based on an analysis of more than 300 print advertisements published between the early 1970s and 2007, as well as television commercials, recruiting websites, and media coverage of recruiting, the book argues that masculinity is still a foundation of appeals today. **Lucy Delap** finds out more on how the talks of a crisis in masculinity may be just rhetorical.*



Enlisting Masculinity: The Construction of Gender in U.S. Military Recruiting Advertising During the All-Volunteer Force.
Melissa T. Brown. Oxford University Press. March 2012.

Melissa Brown's study of the US military's attempts to gain recruits traces a surprisingly diverse set of ways in which men and women could, as the British Army maintain, "Be the Best". Brown surveys the print, television and digital advertisements developed by the US Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force from the anxious early 1970s just after conscription was withdrawn, through to 2007 with the backdrop of the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns. The military have been forced to be more responsive to the changing civilian gender norms by the onset of the 'All-Volunteer Force'. Brown's lucid and fascinating study sets out to disaggregate the US military by attending to the very different gender norms associated with each sub-branch. The Marines' homosociality and 'matey' group identity contrasts with the Navy's foregrounding of tradition and the adventure of travel, or the individualism and technophilia of the Air Force. This overt goal allows for a wider backdrop of social mores and socio-economic change to be illustrated, reviewing the ways in which the forces have interacted with, reflected, and shaped American society in the contemporary past.



While some sceptical scholars have suspected that looking at men, especially in their more hegemonic guises such as 'muscular soldier', will mean the same old diet of male-centric history or sociology, Brown confidently shows the reverse. Her study offers a good example of how scholarship on masculinities does not require women's experiences, constraints and choices to be

removed from the picture. She is attentive to attempts to integrate and contain women and femininities within the US military. *Enlisting Masculinity* is scathing about the tokenism that was practiced in the Navy in which women have largely been figured as a pleasure of shore rather than agents in their own right. In contrast, Brown notes the relative prominence of women in Army recruiting, though their numbers were never as great as the critics of political correctness claimed in the 1990s. She charts the expansion of women in the combat operations of Afghanistan and Iraq in the 2000s, conflicts which lacked clear front lines and also exposed personnel shortages; this led to a proliferation of roles for women in combat zones. Brown also discusses the racial politics of the Services, revealing the accommodation of Black masculinities into military imagery at specific historical moments, accompanied by a discursive neglect of Black femininities.

Brown's survey of masculine norms is attuned to change over time, and traces the rise of some new options which challenged the traditional strong, courageous, breadwinning and patriotic norms associated with military men. These are the gender norms which have been termed hegemonic in the masculinities literature. Though they persist across the board and above all within the Marine Corps, men are also variously addressed as skilled workers, or businessmen, or humanitarians, often with strong class inflections. Moreover, Brown recognises that the attraction of masculinities modelled on Rambo might be vicarious or fantasised, and have little to do with everyday scripts. She makes no assumption however about the direction of travel, and charts the renewed appeal of warrior manhood in military recruitment of the 2000s, and the consequent peripheralisation of images of women.

The Army, in particular, has been ready to appeal to men's career aspirations rather than virility at many historical moments. Manhood might be achieved by taking responsibility and achieving economic independence, and the traditionally masculine breadwinner role has developed into a more nuanced entity, with diverse appeals to blue collar technical skills, or professional career orientation. *Enlisting Masculinity* usefully unpacks familiar components of masculinity – the breadwinner, the adventurer, the comrade – and shows their varying appeal over time, and within different ethnic or class communities. The Army's recruitment campaigns were more likely to be gender neutral, normalising women's service and preferring to stress qualities available to both sexes, such as patriotism. In broad brush terms, a more technically literate and individualistic masculinity has become predominant in military and civilian realms, accompanying, but not necessarily displacing, older variants that were more collectively achieved and service oriented.

What this study does not tell us much about is how gender norms or scripts were actually encountered, practiced, reworked or resisted by individuals. It is commonplace that adverts, or indeed any kind of cultural product, is subject to diverse reinterpretations, and has no universal message. Brown acknowledges that recruitment images reflect not what is practiced in a society, but what audiences *want* to be true. But we learn little about audiences and their internalised values from this study, and rather gain insight into what the advertising agencies and institutions of the military have *wanted* their audiences to want to be true. There is clearly scope for a

reception history of this material, which would likely reveal the lack of purchase many of these gender scripts had for the poor and often educationally marginalised young men, or occasionally women, they were aimed at. What, for example, did the teenage female readers of *Seventeen* make of the Army's rather ambiguous assertion that 'There's Something About a Soldier'? Brown acknowledges that the key variable in determining recruitment is in any case the state of the economy, and it is clear that each decision to enlist is a complex individual calculation. *Enlisting Masculinity* goes only some of the way to unpacking the calculations made by historical agents.

Overall, this is a story of conflicted, local or hybrid masculinities. Brown draws repeatedly on theories of "new world order masculinity", a "tough and tender" image often associated with peacekeeping rather than conflict-oriented roles for men. Her evidence, however, suggests that there is no single transition from traditional to a 'new' masculinity. She charts the changes wrought by the post-2001 campaigns but sees a great deal of continuity in the various scripts on offer.

Brown frequently writes of the gender flux she perceives as characterising modern America, and rightly points to an evolving, reciprocal relationship between the military and models of masculinity. Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of this book is its loosely formulated idea of a crisis in masculinities at the inception of the All-Volunteer Force, followed by very little in the way of transformation. The 'crisis' so commonly associated with the 1970s, Brown argues, was brought about through the influence of the women's liberation movement, the rise of non-normative family forms, the discrediting of the military masculinity in the Vietnam War debacle, and the economic downturn that caused masculine labour market vulnerability.

But the scripts of American masculinity, while evolving, show no dramatic break, and suggest that talks of crisis may be just rhetorical. Scripts of manhood continue to reference older modes alongside newer connotations. And none have become obviously gender egalitarian; there seems little crisis, but rather flexible and persistent patriarchal norms, in the US military.

Lucy Delap is a fellow of St Catharine's College, Cambridge, and a member of the History Faculty, University of Cambridge. Her book *The Feminist Avant-Garde: Transatlantic Encounters, of the early twentieth century* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) won the 2008 Women's History Network Prize. *Knowing Their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth Century Britain*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2011. She is currently working on masculinities, gender activism, and religion in twentieth century Britain. [Read more reviews by Lucy.](#)

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