
Women's Liberation in Soviet, Sino, and American State Building: Theory and Practice

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I. Introduction

Women's liberation is a concept that is almost always found at the heart of revolutionary thinking. Plato, devising the ideal state in which all perform work according to inborn ability and hold goods in common according to the dictates of justice, very soon discovers that marriage and the nuclear family are hindrances to the perfectly just republic.¹ Plato's plan for abolishing the traditional family pertains to the guardian class and exemplifies a deep suspicion of the family as fostering attitudes detrimental to building the just state. Plato was the opposite of an egalitarian, but the view of the family as a harbinger of "private morality" would in the modern period characterize radically egalitarian philosophies that envision an all-dominating public consciousness and a corresponding collective activism. Family life, especially for women, is not naturally suited to this political objective. The construction of Plato's perfectly just city entails the assurance that women worthy of being "guardians" can outsource childcare and can freely produce guardian-worthy children, thereby achieving demographic and political goals.²

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¹ See Plato, *Republic* 457d and 462a.

² *Ibid.*, 459d-461b.

The philosophy of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels is very different from Plato's in important respects but their thoughts on marriage and the family run largely parallel to his with regard to the notion that women's traditional roles as domestic caregivers is a hindrance to the creation of a new and wholly just state.

In pursuit of this new, egalitarian society, the Soviets made women's liberation a priority, enacting the Soviet Family Code in 1918 which sought to revolutionize the institution of marriage and the traditional relations between the sexes and within the family. The Chinese communists, following the Soviet example, issued similar legislation during the revolution leading up to the establishment of the People's Republic of China and then codified it in 1950 right after its official establishment. The Soviet women's liberation campaign in Central Asia is notorious for its veil-burning campaigns and backlash from the traditional Islamic society. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) similarly met with tremendous and often violent resistance from the traditional society. Interestingly, the United States pursued some related goals towards women's liberation in conjunction with regime change as a part of its mission to democratize Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s.

In this article, I examine the concept of women's liberation as it relates to revolutionary state building using three historical examples: the Soviet policy of *hujum* in Uzbekistan in the 1920s, the CCP policies toward women and marriage from the time of the birth of the CCP in 1921 until the end of the second Marriage Law campaign in 1953, and U.S. policies and rhetoric toward Afghan and Iraqi women during the respective U.S. interventions. Scholarship widely addresses these case studies individually and generally attributes the failure of these programs to the subordination of women's liberation to larger ideological goals and the overall goal of state building.³ Scholars have not, however, attempted

³ Many scholars have analyzed the Soviet campaign to liberate women in Central Asia. Many argue that the Soviet effort to emancipate women was subordinated to the larger mission to bring communism to the satellite states and, in this case, to radically remake Islamic society in accordance with the Marxist-Leninist vision. See, for example, Nancy Lubin, "Women in Soviet Central Asia: Progress and Contradictions," *Soviet Studies* XXXIII, no. 2 (April 1981), 182-203; Shoshana Keller, "Trapped Between State and Society: Women's Liberation and Islam in Soviet Uzbekistan, 1926-1941," *Journal of Women's History* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1998), 20-44; Gregory Massell's pioneering work *The Surrogate Proletariat* argues that, in the absence of a proletariat, Muslim women could be politicized and become a social and political vanguard. See, Gregory Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974). Some scholars, such as Adrienne Edgar, have placed Soviet action in the region in comparative context, comparing late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European colonial empires in the same region. See Adrienne Edgar, "Bolshevism, Patriarchy, and the Nation: The Soviet 'Emancipation' of Muslim Women

to compare these episodes in order to draw a more general conclusion about the implications of women's liberation in the context of revolutionary state building. Such a comparison, which this article undertakes, suggests that women's liberation is not a subsidiary goal but may in fact be part and parcel of revolutionary state-building programs. Examining the connection between the gender theory that underpins these revolutionary efforts and its concrete practice helps to illuminate the connection between women's liberation and the overall political movement. One of the assumptions of existing scholarship is that if women's liberation had been pursued for its own sake rather than as a part of a larger mission it would have fared better and possibly succeeded. My findings challenge that assumption. I contend that, in these instances at least, the regimes did not treat women's liberation as ancillary to a "larger" mission. Rather, they appeared convinced that the success of women's liberation would greatly contribute to the success of the new regime and devoted vast resources to that effort. The failures of these campaigns evince the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of "liberating" women as part of a revolutionary social program. Given the predictably disastrous results, we must ask if the revolutionary vision of a society forcibly reconstituted along gender and family lines is a sound one. This study also sheds new light on U.S. operations in the Middle East, suggesting that the U.S. ef-

in Pan-Islamic Perspective, *Slavic Review* 65, No. 2 (Summer 2006), 252-272. Similarly, scholars have examined the Chinese Communist Party's attempts to liberate women as a part of the communist agenda in the twentieth century. See, for example, Neil J. Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family: Politics, Love, and Divorce in Urban and Rural China, 1949-1968* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000); Kay Ann Johnson, *Women, the Family, and Peasant Revolution in China*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983); Wei Xu, "From Marriage Revolution to Revolutionary Marriage: Marriage Practice of the Chinese Communist Party in Modern Era, 1920s-1950s" (2011), Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository; Pei Jiang and Wei Wang, "Tradition, Revolution and Gender: An Analysis of Wife-Initiated Divorce in North China's Revolutionary Bases from 1941-1949," in *Frontiers of History in China* 2016, 11 (1): 66-92. Scholars have also analyzed the Bush administration's actions vis-à-vis the liberation of Muslim women in Afghanistan and Iraq. See, for example, Michael L. Ferguson, "'W' Stands for Women: Feminism and Security Rhetoric in the Post-9/11 Bush Administration," *Politics and Gender* 1, Issue 1 (March 2005), 9-38; Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Barbara Finlay, *Bush and the War on Women: Turning Back the Clock on Women's Progress* (New York: Zed Books, 2006). Douglas Northrop, who has studied the Soviet emancipation of women in Central Asia, observes in passing that after the September 11 attacks "Afghan women's burqas served as indisputable proof of the Taliban regime's medieval character," and "Western writers and news magazines took it as self-evident that all Muslim women would yearn for emancipation from the yoke of such fundamentalist tyranny." See Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 354.

fort to build democracy shares with revolutionary communism the normative belief that disrupting traditional gender norms is an important step toward building a new regime.

It might, at first, seem unwarranted or far-fetched to compare U.S. actions and rhetoric on the issue of women's equality in the Middle East to the policies of two twentieth-century communist regimes.⁴ There are, after all, many obvious differences. However, there are some striking similarities between the U.S. foreign policy vision and strategy toward women in Afghanistan and Iraq, on the one hand, and the vision and tactics of the Russian Soviets and Chinese communists toward women, on the other hand. These three case studies have been chosen in order to demonstrate that among otherwise diverse cultures and historical contexts, there is a core vision that has guided the desire to liberate women as part of revolutionary state building.⁵ These findings have contemporary relevance as policymakers consider the role of gender equality movements in other "modernization" and state-building efforts. In 2017, Congress passed the "Women, Peace and Security Act," which seeks to advance women's rights globally in accordance with the observation that "social and political marginalization of women strongly correlates with the likelihood that a country will experience conflict."⁶ The conclusions of this article help to illustrate the practical effects of policies geared toward the radical liberation of women in traditional societies and can help inform thinking about women's issues in foreign policy.

II. Theoretical Foundations of Women's Emancipation and Revolutionary Thought

In October 1918, almost immediately after the Bolsheviks assumed power in Russia, the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Union issued a law on Marriage, the Family, and Guardianship which aimed

⁴ George W. Bush characterized the war in Iraq as a part of the "global democratic revolution" led by the United States. See, "Remarks by President George W. Bush at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy," United States Chamber of Commerce, Washington, D.C., November 6, 2003.

⁵ Volumes might be written comparing and contrasting these efforts, and other satellite states, nations, and regimes than those examined here might be profitably included for comparison. It might be asked why the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in the 1970s and 1980s was not chosen in lieu of the Soviet intervention in Uzbekistan earlier in the century. This might well have been a useful case study, but, given the relatively plentiful scholarship, both empirical and theoretical, on the Soviet policy of *hujum* in Central Asia as well as its stark consequences, the latter has been chosen for this article.

⁶ United States Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security, June 2019.

at the “withering away” of the family.⁷ The Bolshevik and outspoken women’s rights advocate Alexandra Kollontai stated that women’s maternal and familial duties would go the way of private property and become public responsibilities. “Just as housework withers away, so the obligation of parents to their children withers away,” Kollontai said. “Society will feed, bring up, and educate the child.”⁸ Along with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the Soviets and CCP believed that modern social organization, rooted in the nuclear family, represented a holdover of a bourgeois, feudal, and tribal past. Only through its eradication could communism fully come into being. Friedrich Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) was among the most influential works on this topic in Russia and China and well summarizes the logic of revolutionary women’s emancipation.⁹ According to Engels, “monogamous marriage” represents the first class opposition, and also class oppression: that of man over woman. According to this theory, bourgeois marriages are based exclusively in material considerations and correspondingly reflect the material conditions of capitalist society rather than any genuine male-female romantic attraction. Genuine marriage is possible only where “there is no property”: a wife is free whose husband has no economic hold over her and their relationship is bound purely by romantic attraction. Liberating the woman from the home and bringing her into “the labour market,” therefore, liberates her from male ownership through her (financial) “right to dissolve the marriage.”¹⁰ Engels tries to solve the obvious conundrum for the working mother by socializing childcare and domestic duties. As a consequence, “[t]he monogamous family as the economic unit of society [must] be abolished.”

Philosophically, the United States and the West are, to a great extent, the legacies of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, certainly more so than Marx and Engels. Therefore, a brief outline of their respective philosophies of marriage is important for setting U.S. operations in

⁷ Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1.

⁸ Alexandra Kollontai, “Communism and the Family,” quoted in Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution*, 10. Cf. Plato, *Republic* 460c-d.

⁹ Friedrich Engels’s *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* had been partially translated in China in 1907 and then again during the May Fourth movement, with the complete translation appearing in China in 1929. See Wei Xu, “From Marriage Revolution to Revolutionary Marriage: Marriage Practice of the Chinese Communist Party in Modern Era, 1920s-1950s” (2011), Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository, 111.

¹⁰ Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: Penguin Books, 2020) 103.

their proper philosophical context. The philosophies of Locke and Rousseau on marriage and love represent a revolutionary turn in Western thinking about the proper relationship between the sexes and in some ways anticipate the theories of Marx and Engels. Locke and Rousseau are different in many respects from Marx and Engels and also from one another, but they share the fundamental conviction that marriage must not be subordinate to social, familial, communal, or religious institutional norms but ought to reflect the romantic desires and mutual attraction of free and equal persons. The older view of marriage did not assume that romantic love was necessary for marital union, and, in fact, other factors may be more significant for determining the suitability of the match.¹¹ John Locke helped to revolutionize the traditional Western, Christian understanding of marriage, stating that it is “a voluntary compact between man and woman” whose purpose is the procreation of children yet is sustained by “a communion of interests.”¹² It is, in addition, dissolvable, “there being no necessity in the nature of the thing, nor to the ends of it, that it should always be for life.” Locke adds that “the wife has in many cases a liberty to separate from [her husband], where natural right, or their contract allows it.”¹³ Rousseau, in other respects very different from Locke, shares Locke’s rejection of traditional Western religious assumptions about marriage in favor of a new metaphysical framework. In the *Emile*, Rousseau discusses at some length the role of the sexual passions and romantic love. Family, religion, and economics are not considerations that should affect Emile’s selection of a spouse. A genuine relationship for Emile, Allan Bloom observes, must be “a freely chosen enduring union between equals based upon reciprocal affection and respect.”¹⁴ *La Nouvelle Héloïse* advances a similar understanding of romantic love and marriage, critiquing certain traditional “bourgeois” aspects of marriage that would seem to undermine what, for Rousseau, is the true foundation of marriage: the voluntary union of two loving persons.¹⁵ This necessarily

¹¹ See Allan Pasco, *Revolutionary Love in Eighteenth and Early-Nineteenth Century France* (Burlington, VT: Farnham, 2009).

¹² John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Ch. VII § 77. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1980), 43. Emphasis added.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Ch. VII § 82, pg. 44.

¹⁴ See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 22. See also, John M. Warner, “Men, Citizens and the Women Who Love Them: Love and Marriage in Rousseau’s *Emile*,” *History of Political Thought* XXXVII, No. 1 (Spring 2016).

¹⁵ See Mark Kremer, *Romanticism and Civilization: Love, Marriage, and Family in Women’s Liberation in State Building*

rough sketch of these seminal thinkers' philosophies of marriage is necessarily truncated but conveys the general direction of their thought on marriage, which is decidedly anti-traditional and oriented instead by a universalist conception of freedom and equality and undergirded by an attachment to romantic love.

III. Women's Economic Emancipation

In 1918, the first Soviet Family Code established women's equality under the law, liberalized divorce, tried to secularize marriage, and banned polygamy, child marriage, and bride price. In 1920, the Islamic legal system was secularized, with the intent of ensuring the new Soviet marriage and divorce laws would be implemented in Central Asia.¹⁶ Finally, in 1927 the Soviet Union began a campaign in Central Asia that it named *hujum*, "assault" or "attack," that consisted of legal, social, educational, and economic measures to encourage women to work and socialize outside of the home and to participate in Communist Party activities. This multi-pronged operation was designed to aid the modernization and Sovietization of Islamic culture. Since the veil served as a visible reminder of the old Islamic order, eradicating it became a focal point of the Soviet campaign in the region. Casting Muslim women as "the lowest of the low," "the most oppressed of the oppressed," painted a picture—"a vision engendered partly by reality and partly by necessity," Gregory Massell says—of a victim desperately in need of saving.¹⁷ Women were called "an absolutely benighted part of the household," and through this imagery the Soviets achieved a foothold for communist ideology despite the absence of a proletarian working class.¹⁸

Following Engels, the *hujum* sought to push Muslim women into the industrial and public economy, which would at once emancipate them financially and break down taboos against integration of the sexes. In this manner, women were drafted into the fields during the collectivization campaign—a move motivated as much by economic

Rousseau's *'Julie'* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017).

¹⁶ Özge Öz Döm, "Muslim Women in Soviet Central Asia," *Tarih Incelemeleri Dergisi* XXXIII, No. 1 (2018): 96-97.

¹⁷ S. Liubimova, *V Pervye Gody* [In the Initial Years], 11; A. Nukhrat, *Oktiabr' i Zhenshchina Vostoka* [October and the Woman of the East], 36, cited in Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat*, 93; 95.

¹⁸ This is the argument of Gregory Massell in his pioneering work, *The Surrogate Proletariat*. Women were to be a stand-in for the proletariat in the Middle East, and act as the revolutionary vanguard.

as political considerations. Party planners hoped that women would even become the main source of labor in certain sectors.¹⁹ Women participating in industry were to “bridge the gulf” between traditional society and the new, modern Soviet one, according to one communist propagandist.²⁰ Women were given vocational training and those who excelled in school were promoted to positions of authority and into the sciences, medicine, and the academy. “Millions of female [working] hands are kept under lock and key,” Anna Nukhrat, a party worker, propagandist, and one of the first female Turkish writers said. “The laws of seclusion are a hindrance to the utilization [of those hands] in socially significant work. [The same laws] do not permit women to attain full emancipation.”²¹ For the Soviets, Muslim women’s participation in the national economy was essential. According to Lenin, industrial work would promote women’s “direct participation in social production,” “push forward their [humane] development . . . and independence,” and ultimately move social conditions beyond “the patriarchal immobility of pre-capitalist relationships.”²² Women’s financial and ontological emancipation from their husbands and family was to be an important contribution to the acceleration of history toward communism.

The Chinese Communist Party followed a similar logic as it employed Soviet tactics to break down traditional Chinese marital and gender norms. A women’s emancipation movement had grown in China since the nineteenth century and gained strength during the May Fourth cultural movement, but it acquired new momentum and strength when the CCP assumed power and co-opted the movement.²³ Chinese women up until the twentieth century were subjected to what many in the West would consider brutal, backward practices, including their sale and purchase, female infanticide, foot-binding, abuse at the hands of their husbands, and their inability to file for divorce. The Chinese Soviet Constitution of November 7, 1931, promised “the thorough emancipation of

¹⁹ Such as the growing of cotton, production of silk, and textile, clothing, and food industries. See Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat*, 166.

²⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, 168.

²¹ A. Nukhrat, *Vosmoe Marta na Vostoke* [*The Eighth of March (Woman’s Day) in the East*], 38-39, cited in Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat*, 165.

²² Vladimir Lenin, “On the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution,” as cited in *ibid.*, 168.

²³ For a brief outline of the status of women in China from pre-modern to modern times, see Yuhui Li, “Women’s Movement and Change of Women’s Status in China,” in *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 1, No. 1 (January 2000), 30-40, and Joyce Jennings Walstedt, “Reform of Women’s Roles and Family Structures in the Recent History of China,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 40, No. 2 (May, 1978): 379-392.

women; [the Soviet government of China] recognizes freedom of marriage and will put into operation various measures for the protection of women, to enable women gradually to attain the material basis required for their emancipation from the bondage of domestic work, and to give them the possibility of participating in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the entire society.”²⁴ Women’s departments formed throughout China, as they did in Central Asia, in order to promulgate the new decree and to encourage women to make use of it. In 1950, the CCP issued the Marriage Law, which extended and broadened its earlier decrees. Getting women to work outside of the home was one of the most important orders of business, and this was done through legislation, propaganda, and social pressure. One communist periodical in 1955 derided women who did not leave the home as mere “family women” who found it difficult to justify their “unproductive” position.²⁵

Encouraging women to leave home for the workplace entailed the disruption of deeply entrenched beliefs governing gender norms. As one scholar summarizes, “To get women out of the house, marriage had to be attacked.”²⁶ The Marriage Regulations of 1931 and then the marriage campaign of 1950-1953, which began with the Marriage Law of 1950, liberalized divorce laws and codified the “freedom of marriage” principle. The divorce clause had the most far-reaching effect. It permitted, for the first time in China, women legally to divorce their husbands and to retain their property rights, even going so far as to stipulate that the ex-husband must provide for his ex-wife until she finds another husband. For women even theoretically to be able to leave their husbands struck at the foundation of traditional Chinese marital norms. The CCP trumpeted the revolutionary Marriage Law of 1950 as “smashing the mental and physical shackles imposed upon women by the feudal culture”²⁷ and promoted the idea that “wife-initiated divorce marks the awakening of women’s self-awareness of their independent rights.”²⁸

The Chinese communists, like their Soviet counterparts, followed

²⁴ Conrad Brandt, Benjamin Schwartz, and John K. Fairbank, eds., *A Documentary History of Chinese Communism* (New York: Atheneum, 1966), 223.

²⁵ Lucy Jen Huang, “Some Changing Patterns in the Communist Chinese Family,” *Marriage and Family Living* 23, No. 2 (May, 1961): 140.

²⁶ Shelah Gilbert Leader, “The Emancipation of Chinese Women,” *World Politics* 26, no. 1 (1973): 60.

²⁷ Pei Jiang and Wei Wang, “Tradition, Revolution and Gender: An Analysis of Wife-Initiated Divorce in North China’s Revolutionary Bases from 1941–1949,” *Frontiers of History in China* 11, Issue 1 (2016): 72.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

the belief of Marx and Engels that the genuine *metaphysical* liberation of women, which could only be realized in full communism, would follow their political and economic liberation. The Resolution of the Second National Congress in 1922 summed up the CCP's belief that "women's liberation must be accompanied by the labor liberation. The real liberation of women can only be obtained after the establishment of the proletarian regime."²⁹ It was expected that under communism, an entirely "new woman" would emerge. Han Suyin writes in the preface to the Marxist *Women's Liberation in China* (1977) that the goal of the liberation of Chinese women is not mere legal and economic equality, "It is the profound transformation of woman herself." Suyin well captures the essence of the Marxist-Leninist belief about women. "The great leap forward of Chinese women is best seen in the fact that they are not liberating themselves *only* in order to attain equality with men and economic benefits, but in order to 'make the revolution,' to contribute to the consolidation of socialism, for only in this consolidation can they also consolidate their own liberation, and truly become 'half of heaven.'"³⁰ The final product of women's emancipation would be nothing less than an ontological transformation in Chinese womanhood, a view shared by committed communists from leaders down to the cadres and activists.

In a very different context, the United States commenced a mission to liberate Muslim women in Afghanistan and Iraq following the invasions in the early 2000s. This move, like the Soviet and CCP campaigns, was tied to an ideological mission to transform the Middle East politically and, arguably, metaphysically. The theories of many influential neoconservatives in the George W. Bush administration held that America could usher in global democracy by way of the Middle East. Its philosophy of history blended with a geopolitical strategy of democratic nation-building that, as will be seen, in some ways resembled the philosophy and strategy of the Soviets. The Bush Doctrine disparaged "classic" definitions of national interest in favor of a "revolutionary" and more enlightened "universalist ideology" of "humanitarian interventionism" that would help lead to global democracy.³¹ These beliefs were supported by a philosophy of history that imagined democracy to be the

²⁹ Quoted in Wei Xu, "From Marriage Revolution to Revolutionary Marriage," 114.

³⁰ Claudie Broyelle, *Women's Liberation in China*, trans. Michèle Cohen and Gary Herman (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1977; first published in French in 1973) vii.

³¹ Charles Krauthammer, "Democratic Realism: An American Foreign Policy for a Unipolar World," Volume 2004 of Irving Kristol lecture (Washington: AEI Press), 9; Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 40.

final historical stage, “the cause of all mankind.”³² The “will to freedom” exists universally, the neoconservative theorist Charles Krauthammer said, and is “the engine of history.”³³ The United States, it was imagined, could serve a special role in the unfolding dialectic of freedom, which could be “hastened” by military and political intervention.³⁴ Like the Soviet ethos, the Bush Doctrine professed the belief that American ideals and practices were not culturally or historically conditioned but expressions of an “idea” that could be universalized and transplanted. However, while Marx imagined the final stage of communism as scientifically determined by the laws of economics, many neoconservatives, such as George W. Bush and Michael Novak, imagined that God was guiding nations toward their destiny of democracy.³⁵ “The momentum of freedom in our world is unmistakable, and it is not carried forward by our power alone.” Bush added, “We can trust in that greater power who guides the unfolding of the years.”³⁶

The Bush Doctrine interpreted U.S. intervention as “Beyond power. Beyond Interest.”³⁷ U.S. foreign policy represented an extension of universal right and truth and would move history toward its fulfillment in democracy.³⁸ William Kristol and Robert Kagan had said, “It is precisely because American foreign policy is infused with an unusually high degree of morality that other nations find that they have less to fear from its otherwise daunting power.”³⁹ This type of rhetoric harkened to the Soviet belief that it was operating purely from benevolent motives. The new family laws were always “announced with great fanfare” and “Soviet officials justified these new legal norms in humanitarian terms, as

³² George W. Bush, Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, January 20, 2004.

³³ Krauthammer, “Democratic Realism: An American Foreign Policy for a Unipolar World,” 14.

³⁴ William Kristol and Robert Kagan, “Introduction: National Interest and Global Responsibility,” in *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy*, eds. William Kristol and Robert Kagan (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000), 20.

³⁵ See, Michael Novak, *Catholic Social Thought and Liberal Institutions: Freedom with Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

³⁶ George W. Bush, Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, January 20, 2004.

³⁷ Krauthammer, “Democratic Realism: An American Foreign Policy for a Unipolar World,” 14.

³⁸ See, for example, Kristol and Kagan’s discussion of “national greatness” in “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy,” in *Foreign Affairs*, 75(4), July 1996, 32. See also, George H. W. Bush, Address Before a Join Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, Jan. 29, 1991.

³⁹ Kristol and Kagan “Introduction: National Interest and Global Responsibility,” 22.

required by the party's self-proclaimed duty to defend the most defenseless members of Central Asian society."⁴⁰ Supporting this line were the contrasting images of a benighted population of veiled Muslim women with women gaily dancing in the streets after their liberation.⁴¹ For the U.S. as for the Soviets, humanitarian justifications as joined to a progressive philosophy of history helped to overcome the obvious paradox of avowedly anticolonial regimes imposing what might otherwise appear to be colonial rule.⁴²

Against this philosophical background, the U.S. attempted the military overthrow of the Afghan and Iraqi regimes and the implementation of Western-style democracy through legal, educational, and cultural reforms. The liberation of Muslim women was to be one major component of the "awakening" of the slumbering democratic consciousness of Middle Easterners. In a radio address in November 2001, First Lady Laura Bush declared, "The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women."⁴³ The United States spent millions of dollars on programs for women's programs in Afghanistan and Iraq, and while the U.S. did not attempt to initiate unveiling campaigns or to legislate directly on family life, it encouraged women to leave the home through various entrepreneurial, educational, and political measures backed by enormous funding, something the Soviets and CCP lacked.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Douglas Northrop, "Subaltern Dialogues: Subversion and Resistance in Soviet Uzbek Family Law," *Slavic Review* 60, No. 1 (Spring 2001): 119.

⁴¹ One Soviet propaganda piece declares that the peoples of Central Asia were able to "[throw] off the yoke" and "break out of their state of backwardness and ignorance" thanks to the Revolution. See, R. Tuzmuhamedov, *How the National Question Was Solved in Soviet Central Asia (A Reply to Falsifiers)*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), 66, 67.

⁴² On December 3, 2001, Bruce Nussbaum triumphantly declared in *Business Week*, "The scenes of joy in the streets of Kabul evoke nothing less than the images of Paris liberated from the Nazis. Women taking to the streets to bask in the Afghan sun, free at last to show their faces. Children gathering to fly kites, a once forbidden pastime. Old people dancing to music, banned for many years. The liberation of Afghanistan from the tyranny of the Taliban is a watershed event that could reverberate for years. The warm embrace by ordinary people of the freedom to do ordinary things is a major victory for Western humanist values."

⁴³ Laura Bush, Radio Address, Crawford, Texas, Nov. 17, 2001.

⁴⁴ In 2002 the US-Afghan Women's Council was formed to provide education and microfinance programs to women in Afghanistan. This organization was to "help promote partnerships between the public and private sectors, as between the two countries and governments concerned"; and its "key function" was to "mobilize and bring together resources, expertise, and networking capabilities across governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private companies—and target them specifically toward practical projects for women." The Department of State and NGOs offered grants, loans, and vocational training for women. In Afghanistan, the U.S. focused on providing

The Bush administration seemed to understand the role that women's economic emancipation could play in the overthrow of the old Islamic societies and that their emancipation was crucial for that goal. One scholar said that for the Bush administration, "Entrepreneurial women . . . are the sign of a free market economy, which is itself taken as a stand-in for a democratic government."⁴⁵ Women working outside of the home and participating in the public economy or the "free market" was assumed to contribute to the formation of a new political regime characterized by freedom and equality. Not unlike Marx and Engels, the Bush Doctrine implicitly assumed that material conditions could greatly impact the social and political character of the nation.

IV. Education, Literacy Campaigns, and Political Activism

In addition to the economic and material aspect of the respective women's liberation campaigns, there was a strong need to educate women in the principles of the new regime, which would, in turn, aid in women's direct political participation and activism. The Soviets and CCP tried to normalize new gender relations through indirect efforts such as "family evenings," events in which men and unveiled women were to socialize together and listen to "educational" lectures, and also direct efforts at re-education.⁴⁶ The Bush administration, on the other hand, was less aggressive in its approach but similarly hoped to break down existing gender norms in an attempt to recreate the character of the regime. In 2004 Colin Powell announced the creation of the Iraqi Women's Democracy Initiative, a \$10 million project which, according

vocational courses for women and girls, training women in the skills they would need for employment, providing employment opportunities, and extending lines of small-scale credit and microloans, all with the specific aim of "enhanc[ing] women's ability to achieve economic independence." In Iraq, USAID similarly provided financial assistance to NGOs working to help with women's employment and "in support of women's rights." Projects such as the Iraqi Women's Gift Fund combined government support and funding from U.S. corporations and private citizens to help with the "economic and political empowerment of Iraqi women." See US Department of State archive, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/wi/rls/46289.htm>. Accessed August 13, 2019; US Department of State archive, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/wi/rls/46289.htm>. Accessed August 13, 2019; and US Department of State archive, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/wi/rls/10684.htm>. Accessed August 13, 2019.

⁴⁵ Ferguson, "'W' Stands for Women," 28.

⁴⁶ This radical move to integrate the sexes and break down segregation was even made mandatory for the wives of some dehqons who had received land in the land reform campaign. See Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 196-97.

to Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky, was to help “women become full and vibrant partners in Iraq’s developing democracy.”⁴⁷ At the time of the announcement one State Department official said, “There was a need to bring women into the political process immediately.”⁴⁸ According to the State Department archival record, the the purpose of the Initiative was to provide “skills in key areas, including education for democracy, leadership training, political training, teaching, coalition-building, organizational management, entrepreneurship, and media training.”⁴⁹ One of the recipients of a grant from the Initiative, the Independent Women’s Forum, hosted a Women Leaders Conference in 2005 that was to give women “a better understanding of the universal principles of democracy.”⁵⁰

The desire to educate women in “the universal principles of democracy” resembles at least the ideological component of the Soviet and CCP literacy campaigns, which similarly provided an education to women, albeit in the principles of Soviet communism. These campaigns were, according to official records, wildly successful for men and women and brought up the literacy rate for women between ages nine and forty-nine in Uzbekistan, for instance, to a purported 97 percent.⁵¹ The purpose of these “end illiteracy” campaigns, however, was not merely to provide women with the benefit of being able to read, despite their widely hailed success. In 1926, a year before the *hujum* was launched in Uzbekistan, the Arabic script began “to disappear from official usage and be slowly replaced by ‘modern,’ ‘international’ Latin alphabets.” Thus, women (and men) who became literate under the new system could read only Soviet literature and were effectively cut off from their native history. In China, the spread of literacy was expected to assist the state in the mobilization and control of the peasants through bureaucratic and economic rationalization, for example.⁵² As Glen Peterson observes, the mass literacy campaign in China in the mid-1950s “cannot be understood apart from the larger political project of which it was a part, which involved creating a new class of peasants-turned-production-team-members.” The “peasant

⁴⁷ Quoted in Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 63.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ U.S. Department of State archive, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/wi/rls/51046.htm>. Accessed August 13, 2019.

⁵⁰ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 63.

⁵¹ While almost certainly inflated, there is truth to the success of the program. See Kamp, *The New Woman*, 7.

⁵² See Glen Peterson, “State Ideologies and the Transformation of Rural China,” in *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 32 (July 1994): 101-103.

education” was tailored to local economic needs with a focus on official ideology.⁵³

The Bush administration tailored its educational efforts to the consolidation of the new regime and an education in “the universal principles” of the regime. The existing civics courses were eliminated in 2003 for ostensible pro-Saddam bias of the textbooks. The “My Arabic Library” program translated into Arabic American classics such as *Tom Sawyer*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, and *Of Mice and Men* (all to the befuddlement of locals).⁵⁴ In Afghanistan, the U.S. purchased some 10 million textbooks for children and 4,000 “teacher-training kits.” The U.S. also helped to support the World Food Program’s “food-for-education” project, which gave children flour in exchange for regular school attendance. Girls were given oil in addition to flour as an added incentive to attend.⁵⁵ Then Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz in a *Washington Post* column highlighted the importance of educating women in “the New Iraq”:

the United States is giving special emphasis to helping Iraqi women achieve greater equality and has allocated \$27 million for women’s programs. Education for women is one of the highest priorities, and the United States has committed more than \$86.8 million to education projects, with special emphasis on ensuring that girls are registered and attending school.⁵⁶

The ideological motives behind U.S. funding had a tremendous impact shaping women’s organizations in general and the types of education programs that would be sponsored by grant funding in particular. The \$10 million allocated to the Iraqi Women’s Democracy Initiative stipulated that the recipients of the grants must include the “training of trainers” in their democracy education, leadership training, political training, “teaching entrepreneurship,” and other activities.⁵⁷ Many Iraqi women activists in the diaspora at the time were “critical of the way the priorities of Iraqi women’s organizations had been shaped by U.S. funding rather than the needs of ordinary Iraqi women” and of the way that

⁵³ Ibid., 113.

⁵⁴ See former foreign service officer Peter Van Buren’s personal narrative about this particular program in Peter Van Buren, *We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People*. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2011), 1.

⁵⁵ The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) purchased 10 million textbooks in science, math, and reading for grades 1-12 and funded teacher-training programs in which half of the teachers and half of the educators were women. See U.S. Department of State archive, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/wi/rls/10684.htm>. Accessed August 113, 2019.

⁵⁶ Paul D. Wolfowitz, “Women in the New Iraq,” *The Washington Post*, February 1, 2004.

⁵⁷ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 63.

the sponsored women's organizations were designed to help "sustain a global neoliberal economic order."⁵⁸

Since many women were teachers, these "teacher training" programs served the dual purpose of getting women into the workplace and also supplanting the old system with a new democracy-oriented one. The "de-Ba'thification" of Iraqi society removed teachers who had been members of the Ba'th Party while U.S. funding for women's programs helped to get women trained in the "universal principles of democracy" into positions of authority, for instance, as teachers.⁵⁹ This top-down approach of disseminating the principles of the new ruling regime—effectively the United States through the Coalition Provisional Authority—approximated the Soviet and CCP belief that the dissemination of the new ideology was paramount. It also suffered from many of the same setbacks, especially the new society-wide reliance on a largely inexperienced and untrained managerial cadre.⁶⁰ The U.S., like the Soviets and the CCP, seemed to assume that an assault on the old ways of life would naturally lead to the new cultural norms embraced by the new ruling party.

The U.S. did achieve some short-term goals for women. Women entered politics and were elevated, however temporarily, within Iraqi society to positions of some power or prestige. In Iraq, in the January 2005 parliamentary elections, over 2,000 women ran for office. Women won 31% of the Transitional National Assembly (TNA) seats, and 40% of these women had been trained under U.S. government programs.⁶¹ However, reports from the U.S. Department of State archive, which are peppered with language about "enabling participation," "building alliances," and developing "human rights advocacy skills," do not reveal the concrete outcomes of these programs. And their now-defunct status would suggest their futility. We must wonder if accounts such as that of former U.S. Foreign Service Officer Peter Van Buren's are representative. Van Buren recalls that, because "freeing women from their oppression got tied into the overall idea of liberating Iraq" and "ranked high on our collective agen-

⁵⁸ Ibid., 67.

⁵⁹ The Coalition Provisional Authority Order No. 1 provided for the "de-Ba'thification" of Iraqi society including "every national government ministry, affiliated corporations and other government institutions (e.g., universities and hospitals)" and eliminated much of the existing professional class. See Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 67-68.

⁶⁰ "The U.S. administration had not considered that Ba'th Party membership was almost compulsory for public sector workers, particularly at the management level, much as Communist Party membership had been compulsory in the former Soviet bloc." Ibid.

⁶¹ U.S. Department of State archive, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/wi/rls/72237.htm>. Accessed August 13, 2019.

da,” well-funded but unproductive events were held to promote women’s rights. One expensive event simply devolved into a belly-dancing affair for the 180 women present after all of the men departed after lunch.⁶²

V. Consequences

Overall, the condition of women was made much worse after the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Afghan women remained cut out of political decision-making and suffered from lack of basic health care, food, shelter, and security. In Iraq, the situation was much the same.⁶³ “The post-invasion situation has created new and even more devastating forms of oppression for women by a range of social and political actors,” according to Al-Ali and Pratt.⁶⁴ One humanitarian worker in Iraq said:

Women are targeted through abductions, and there are cases of women being sold into sex trafficking. Women are threatened in universities for not wearing the headscarf. You see slogans on the walls telling women to wear the hijab. Women are being attacked and killed. Domestic violence has increased and honor killing has increased because it is easier to get away with now. . . . Early marriages have increased. Women detainees are tortured and subject to sexual abuse.⁶⁵

The bombing campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq destroyed infrastructure and emptied the major cities of women. In Iraq, in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion in 2003, armed groups roamed the streets of Baghdad. “The risk of kidnapping, sexual assault, bombings and assassinations became so high that families often refrained from allowing women and girls to leave the house alone, attend school, or go to work.”⁶⁶ At the height of the sectarian violence in 2006-2007 women were kidnapped, raped, and killed daily. The war’s destructive effects on families and the loss of the male breadwinner resulted in a proliferation of sexual abuse and trafficking of women and children. “Women are threatened by all sides of the conflict: by the armed groups which threaten, kill, and rape them; by the male-dominated security and police forces which fail to protect them and are often complicit in violence against

⁶² Peter Van Buren, *We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People*, 131-134.

⁶³ The Watson Institute at Brown University “Cost of War” project: <http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/social>. Accessed February 15, 2018.

⁶⁴ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 82. For a report on the violence against women in Iraq, see Miriam Puttick, *No Place to Turn: Violence Against Women in the Iraq Conflict* (London: Minority Rights Group International: Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, 2015).

⁶⁵ Quoted by Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 77.

⁶⁶ Puttick, *No Place to Turn*, 4.

them; and by criminal groups which take advantage of their desperate circumstances.”⁶⁷ Women found themselves worse off than they had been under Saddam’s regime.⁶⁸

The imposition of Soviet and communist rule on Uzbekistan and China, respectively, generated upheaval in its own ways. In China, divorce rates exploded after the marriage reform laws were issued, with the vast majority filed by women.⁶⁹ Some women interpreted the ordinances through the lens of political struggle and sought “divorce for the sake of divorce.”⁷⁰ Women might volunteer to get a divorce in order to demonstrate their commitment to the cause. In some cases, “cadres even instigated or forced [women] to divorce.”⁷¹ Thus, male family members would sometimes try to prevent young women from attending women’s meetings, fearing that they would return desiring a divorce.

According to one historian, more often than family members oppressing women in China “were instances of peasants organizing violent opposition within newly created Communist organizations such as peasant associations and the community militia, and receiving the tacit or active blessing of village- and township-level officials.”⁷² These organizations replaced the civil associations that had been destroyed by the civil wars and generally were staffed by “macho young men.” Using their newfound power and weaponry given them by the CCP, these young men were able to wield considerable, even lethal, force against divorce petitioners. In one village cadres locked up women divorce petitioners for up to three weeks and raped them while in prison.⁷³ Other reports document women being assigned construction work as punishment for requesting divorce, or being strung up in the village as an example to other women seeking divorce or having body parts chopped off.⁷⁴ According to one historian, “Some male cadres and other men construed efforts to criticize traditional restrictions on women as a new means to

⁶⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁸ Many have argued that the situation for women was much better under Saddam and that women enjoyed some basic rights and protection. See, for example, Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*, 31-32; Barbara Finlay, *Bush and the War on Women: Turning Back the Clock on Women’s Progress* (New York: Zed Books, 2006), 210; Puttick, *No Place to Turn*, 4.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Jiang and Wang, “Tradition, Revolution and Gender,” 69-70, and Johnson, *Women, the Family, and Peasant Revolution in China*, 70, 118.

⁷⁰ Shanxi Provincial Archives, File no. A1-7-4-13, cited by Jiang and Wang, 82.

⁷¹ Tian Xiujuan, “1943 nian qian Jin-Cha-Ji nongcun funü gongzuo de chubu zongjie (jielu),” 792, cited by Jiang and Wang, 83.

⁷² Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family*, 151.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid. See also Wei Xu, “From Marriage Revolution to Revolutionary Marriage,” 125.

further exploit and sexually abuse women. For example, some members of the Communist Youth in the Soviet districts of western Fukien were accused of forcing women to 'sleep pell-mell with men' under the pretext of 'combating feudalism.'"⁷⁵ The Central Committee of the CCP officially denounced these behaviors and attributed them to "the influence of feudal thoughts."⁷⁶ Many at the top accused local cadres of not administering the laws correctly or effectively and this despite ongoing training efforts as well as directives that the Women's Federations supervise local officials and courts in arbitrating marriage cases.⁷⁷

Tens of thousands of women attempting to exercise their newfound rights were beaten or murdered by angry male family members or members of the community.⁷⁸ Reportedly 10,000 women in the Central-South region were "killed or driven to suicide during the previous year as a result of marriage complication." Examples abound of the horrific torture and murder of women trying to obtain divorce, refusing a betrothal, courting a lover in public, or becoming politically active in the name of women's rights. "In 1953, the Ministry of Justice estimated that, nationally, 70,000 to 80,000 women had 'been murdered or forced into suicide' each year since 1950 as a result of family problems and mistreatment."⁷⁹ Neil J. Diamant argues that male resistance to political attempts at change in the most intimate sphere of life—a sphere that in China had been considered strictly private and familial, outside of the purview of legislation and the state—can be seen as a defensive reaction.⁸⁰

The situation for women in Soviet Central Asia followed a similar trajectory. One scholar notes, "No Soviet initiative caused as much violent upheaval in Uzbek society as the campaign for . . . the liberation of women."⁸¹ Thousands of women were murdered during the *hujum*, estimates ranging from 2,000 to tens of thousands.⁸² The extent of the

⁷⁵ Johnson, *Women, the Family, and Peasant Revolution in China*, 58.

⁷⁶ See "The Communist Party of China's Notice on the Implementation of the Marriage Law," cited in Wei Xu, "From Marriage Revolution to Revolutionary Marriage," 205.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 205-206.

⁷⁸ See Johnson, *Women, the Family, and Peasant Revolution in China*, 47, 129.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁸⁰ See Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family*, 152.

⁸¹ Shoshana Keller, "Trapped Between State and Society: Women's Liberation and Islam in Soviet Uzbekistan, 1926-1941," *Journal of Women's History* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 20.

⁸² Marianne Kamp reports that 2,000 women were murdered in connection with unveiling, *The New Woman*, 186; Shoshana Keller says that the liberation campaign "touched off a firestorm of violence against women which did not die down for several years, and which cost thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of lives," Keller, "Trapped Between State and Society," 25.

violence is difficult to measure, but women and young girls were victims of gruesome acts of violence in connection with the liberation campaign. Husbands or family members often perpetrated crimes of rape, murder, even mutilation against women who had “debauched” themselves and “dishonored” the family by unveiling or otherwise participating in their liberation.⁸³ The violence against women reached such a peak that in 1929, two years after the start of the *hujum* in Soviet Uzbekistan, Party officials decided to scale back the “assault” for liberation. In February 1929, The Soviet newspaper *Uzbekistanskaia Pravda* reported that “The murder of women has taken on a mass character.”⁸⁴ Yet the Soviet regime argued that such violence revealed the need for Soviet liberation from the backward society. However, as one scholar points out, the violence that took place during this time was not simply an impassioned response to the Soviet intrusion into family and social life.⁸⁵ In addition to the conditions of war brought on by resistance to the Soviet regime, Soviet policies had weakened the old elite and undermined civil society. The breakdown of the Islamic social, political, and moral order meant not the proliferation of a new, Soviet society and morality, but the breakdown of order altogether. “In these times you can do anything you want to a woman, and there will be no investigation,” two men reportedly told a farmer after raping his daughter.⁸⁶ The new society continued the victimization of women in new and violent ways with Party members often perpetrating the attacks, emboldened by their new power and status within the regime.⁸⁷

VI. Conclusions

U.S. efforts to liberate women differed markedly in many respects from those of the Soviets in Uzbekistan and the CCP in China. The U.S. relied to a much greater degree on material resources while the Soviets and CCP, lacking the financial means, relied more heavily on legislation, propaganda, “struggle sessions,” and forced social engineering.

⁸³ See Keller, “Trapped Between State and Society,” 25-27.

⁸⁴ *Uzbekistanskaia Pravda*, February 26, 1929, 2. Cited in Shoshana Keller, “Trapped Between State and Society,” 28.

⁸⁵ Kamp, *The New Woman*, 187.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁸⁷ See Northrop, *Veiled Empire*, 98. In Kassansoi, Party members drugged and raped an unveiled woman whom they had summoned. “The police noted, ‘Thus, the people say that the Party wants to unveil women so they can rape them,’” Kamp, *The New Woman*, 196. For violence against women at the hands of Soviet Party members, see Northrop, “Subaltern Dialogues,” 119; Northrop, *Veiled Empire*, 223.

However, the U.S., like the Soviets and the CCP, believed that liberating women from traditional Islamic gender structures was a crucial component of regime change. Moreover, all three of these regimes believed that Muslim women working outside of the household was an essential precondition for the unfolding of a new order of social and even ontological existence. For the Soviets and the CCP, common ownership of the means of production was expected to dissolve class distinctions and animosity and result in an entirely new society, composed of new women and men. The words of one Chinese communist women's activist in 1927 are representative of the Marxist hope:

We think it is not enough to be good by ourselves, for this makes you only submissive under great injustice. This injustice cannot be overcome by goodness and submission but only by fighting. We think you must first overthrow the old economic system and make a new society where people can be good. It is not possible for women to be equal with men just because the law says so; but if the new society is organized then all people get true liberty and women also can be equal.⁸⁸

Mao, in 1955, reflected this sentiment: "Genuine equality between man and woman can be realized only in the process of socialist transformation of society as a whole."⁸⁹ For the Bush administration and other neoconservatives, the U.S. was to act as a vanguard in the creation of a new democratic people in the Middle East.⁹⁰ Forms of social and political existence other than democracy were expected to become outmoded, put on the trash heap of history. "The force of human freedom" is the "only one force of history that can break the reign of hatred and resentment, and expose the pretensions of tyrants, and reward the hopes of the decent and tolerant," George W. Bush said in his second inaugural address.⁹¹ American media beamed with confidence that democracy would take hold in Iraq and Afghanistan. Representative of this attitude was one *New York Times* headline, which said that the Afghan constitution "Heralds Democratic Era" and that "Charter Sets Presidential System, With Minority and Women's Rights."⁹²

⁸⁸ Anna L Strong, *China's Millions: Revolution in Central China*, (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1928), 130.

⁸⁹ Mao Tse-tung, introductory note to "Women Have Gone to the Labour Front" (1955), in *The Socialist Upsurge in China's Countryside* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1957).

⁹⁰ For a treatment of this aspect of vanguardism present within the democratic ideology, see Michael Harland, *Democratic Vanguardism: Modernity, Intervention, and the Making of the Bush Doctrine* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013).

⁹¹ George W. Bush, Second Inaugural Address, Jan. 20, 2005.

⁹² Carlotta Gall, "Afghan Council Gives Approval to Constitution," *New York Times*, January 5, 2004.

Pursuing instability through the destruction of inherited traditions and local ways of life was a tactic that the Soviets, the CCP, and the George W. Bush administration alike believed would accelerate history toward a particular, foreordained political outcome. George W. Bush said in a speech to the United Nations in 2004 that the U.S. must no longer pursue stability in the Middle East but “must take a different approach.”⁹³ The neoconservative Ralph Peters believed that actively destabilizing the Middle East would be mutually beneficial. In “Stability, America’s Enemy,” Ralph Peters said, “[W]ars, revolutions, and decade after decade of instability opened markets to American goods, investors, and ideas.”⁹⁴ Michael Ledeen’s description of “creative destruction” parallels, in many ways, the beliefs underlying the communist desire to “smash feudalism”:

We tear down the old order every day, from business to science, literature, art, architecture, and cinema to politics and the law. Our enemies have always hated this whirlwind of energy and creativity, which menaces their traditions (whatever they may be) and shames them for their inability to keep pace. Seeing America undo traditional societies, they fear us, for they do not wish to be undone. . . . They must attack us in order to survive, just as we must destroy them to advance our historic mission.⁹⁵

Valuing stability in the Middle East, according to this perspective, would resemble pragmatic and merely tinkering liberal or social-democratic reform rather than wholesale revolution. For Ledeen and theorists like him, the arrival of a political destiny of freedom and equality required the complete overhaul of the existing society. The prophecy of George W. Bush of a coming “global democratic revolution,” when seen in this context, is not altogether different in spirit from Lenin’s or Mao’s belief in the imminence and inevitability of communism.

The spectacular failure of these three women’s liberation campaigns suggests the problematic nature of the theories that motivated them. The expectation that radical, top-down dismantling of an inherited social order aided by either radical social engineering programs, as in the Soviet and Chinese communist cases, or vast financial resources and grant programs, as in the case of the U.S., will result in the growth of another, better social system lacks empirical support. The cases here examined suggest that the sudden and violent destruction of inherited ways of life

⁹³ George W. Bush, Speech to United Nations General Assembly, September 21, 2004.

⁹⁴ Ralph Peters, “Stability, America’s Enemy,” *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 31, 4 (2001): 6.

⁹⁵ Michael A. Ledeen, *The War Against the Terror Masters: Why it Happened. Where We Are Now. How We’ll Win.* (New York: Truman Talley Books, 2003), 213.

for a people has the opposite effect—resulting in repressive measures, violence and killing, authoritarian government or martial law, or full-scale civil war among rival factions. In the cases studied here, the loss of the traditional way of life and the disruption of the relations between the sexes—however destructive those might have seemed beforehand—generated additional difficulties for women and children. These measures entailed an overall net loss for women. The evidence from these three case studies suggests that social and political instability generates the worst possible situation for women, regardless of previous institutional injustices.

One problematic aspect of Soviet doctrine and the Bush Doctrine on women's liberation appears to be an overreliance on abstract thinking. Marxist-Leninist and Lockean and Rousseauian notions of marriage assume a universal validity on the basis of unhistorical, visionary theorizing. These philosophies' secular and rationalistic understandings of marriage as a contract or bond that respects romantic feelings between "free and equal" persons is itself historically contingent and not shared among all cultures. Even Rousseau admits that romantic love is ultimately unstable and bound eventually to crumble in disappointed expectations.⁹⁶ This observation combined with empirical evidence from these liberation programs suggests that specific cultural practices cannot be transformed easily by foreign ideals. Outside actors attempting to alter the institution of marriage through a political and philosophical reframing of its local meaning, this research suggests, tends to threaten social stability, a factor that directly affects the outcome for women. Abstract, visionary theorizing seems to have boosted universalistic claims that have aided imperial ambitions in foreign policy and, in this case, effectively politicized marriage. According to one Chinese contemporary, after these laws were promulgated women cadres "chanting empty slogans such as gender equality, and breaking the feudal shackles" would sometimes file for divorce as an act of political liberation rather than as a personal solution to the problem of a bad marriage.⁹⁷ Ultimately, intimate personal unions and relations are complex and culturally contingent and not easily manipulated from above, despite a professed nobility of intentions.

The policies that the Soviets and the Chinese communists, on the one hand, and the George W. Bush administration, on the other, pursued

⁹⁶ For an analysis of Rousseau's conception of "imaginary" and unstable love, see Warner, "Men, Citizens and the Women who Love Them," 117-121.

⁹⁷ Hebei Provincial Archives, File no. 3-1-364-5, cited in Jiang and Wang, "Tradition, Revolution and Gender," 82.

were largely consistent with the philosophies of marriage of Marx and Engels and Locke and Rousseau, respectively. We can assume that these intellectual-cultural-political regimes did their best to liberate women given that their respective understandings of marriage were intimately connected with their overall conception of freedom, equality, and a new egalitarianism. Their respective desires to “liberate” women according to their ruling philosophies speaks to the overall coherence of the philosophy with the practice. Islamic gender relations and family structure are, for example, incompatible with Marxism-Leninism’s belief in radical egalitarianism and collectivism, just as they are incompatible with the Lockean and Rousseauian belief in a free and equal and dissolvable marriage “contract” and free-market capitalism. For this reason, despite the general assumption of some scholars, we can assume that U.S. efforts toward the liberation of Muslim women was in earnest, not a mere rhetorical ploy to galvanize support for the invasions (although it certainly had this effect).⁹⁸ The women’s liberation campaign was an *essential* part of the program to overturn the old ways and to implement an entirely new way of life.

As the U.S. considers its strategy for promoting women’s rights globally and encouraging the participation of women in political processes, it would do well to consider the pitfalls of previous national campaigns for women’s liberation. The “United States Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security” of 2017 has been motivated, in part, by the observation that there is a correlation between women’s status in a country and its political stability. Approaches to this challenge historically have sought women’s liberation first in order to *create* political stability, but the evidence presented in this article indicates that perhaps stability ought to be sought first, which would benefit women. Policies of women’s liberation ought to aspire to maintaining social stability rather than the opposite.

Another more general lesson learned is the danger of designing policies without regard to the concrete historical circumstances of time and place. The social experiments examined in this article evince a stark discrepancy between theory and practice.

⁹⁸ See, for example, Ferguson, “‘W’ Stands for Women”; Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?*; and Finlay, *Bush and the War on Women*.