

Man-Up Mr Snowden! Masculinities and National Security

Written by Klaus Dodds

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KLAUS DODDS, JUN 8 2014

US Secretary of State, John Kerry, recently admonished the National Security Agency contractor now classified as 'leaker' and 'traitor', Edward Snowden to 'man up'. In his comments to NBC news, Kerry also suggested that "A patriot would not run away".

Mr Kerry's 'man up' suggestion was provoked by a sense of frustration that he continued to reside in Russia after being granted temporary asylum in August 2013. Earlier in May 2014, Snowden admitted in a television interview that he was desirous of returning home to the United States but acknowledged that, "Now, whether amnesty or clemency ever becomes a possibility is not for me to say. That's a debate for the public and the government to decide. But, if I could go anywhere in the world, that place would be home" (*Washington Post* 2014). In 2013, lest it be forgotten, Snowden was charged theft of government property, unauthorised communication of national defence matters and the wilful transmission of classified intelligence to others.

Ever since news broke that Edward Snowden was the National Security Agency 'leaker' and fugitive, discussion has raged about his masculinity, including his sexuality (and we might also here reflect on the case of Bradley/Chelsea Manning). There has been no shortage of conspiracy, rumour and speculation about Snowden's sexuality for example. Some of this might have been intended to be satirical (in part tied to the role that the gay journalist Glenn Greenwald of *The Guardian* has played in writing about the Snowden story and the wider implications for intelligence and surveillance) but other commentators have also noted how in the past the National Security Agency and its supporters were swift to smear US intelligence defectors as 'gay' in the past; in particular the case of William Martin and Bernon Mitchell (Anderson 2013).

As recent contributors to E-IR note, the role of men and masculinities is an ongoing project but there is now a substantial body of work that demands of us that we think carefully about how gender, sexuality, race, age, class and intersect with masculinities (for example, Hearn 2012, Remkus 2012 and Mann 2014). Gender scholars have noted, for instance, how gender ideologies idealise, position, and discipline particular features and manifestations of masculinity including the use of physical strength, heterosexuality, leadership, family relationships and occupational achievement. Terms such as hegemonic masculinity encapsulate a longstanding debate in the social sciences and humanities about how masculinities are produced, circulated, resisted and enshrined within public and private cultures.

In the context of geopolitics, intelligence and security, ideologies and practices associated with 'manliness' and masculinities are never politically innocent. One only has to think of President George W. Bush's so-called 'Top Gun' moment in May 2003 to reflect on why his administration thought it might be important for him to be seen piloting a plane on to the flight deck of a US aircraft carrier. As Susan Jeffords (1994) recognised, some twenty years ago, the projection of 'hard bodies' in US cinema was a vital accomplice in contemporary geopolitical claims of the Ronald Reagan administration that the 'wimpy' Carter era was no more. Strength, resolve and dominance would be the leitmotif of a restored and hyper-masculinised America. Post 9-11, such a 'manly' appeal found its manifestation in presidential discourse, behaviour and objects including wearing US armed forces baseball caps, flying jackets, and the like (Cox et al 2007).

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But that was George W Bush at the height of the war on terror. Now it is worth remembering that John Kerry's masculinity has also been questioned in the past. There was a time when he was being accused of being 'unmanly' (Fahey 2007). Vice President Dick Cheney claimed that the then Democratic Party presidential nominee wanted to engage in a 'more sensitive war on terror'. Despite his credentials as a decorated Vietnam veteran, the 2004 presidential election witnessed Senator Kerry's war record being dismantled by a special interest group called Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. While the US Navy later dismissed accusations that Kerry had not earned his Purple Heart, Bronze Star and Silver Star medals, the smear campaign against him helped to deflect attention from President George W. Bush's own war record (a point Michael Moore's film *Fahrenheit 9/11* pursued).

But his war record was not the only aspect of a campaign designed to emasculate John Kerry's candidature (for an excellent overview, Fahey 2007). Kerry's French connections also came back to haunt him. Kerry was taunted about his ability to speak French, his 'French looks', was accused of lacking 'backbone' and being a 'French poodle' (which itself raises interesting questions about how animals are also gendered repeatedly in terms of ascribing masculine and feminine qualities). This assault on his character, his body, and his behaviour came in the immediate aftermath of deep disagreements between the United States and European allies France and Germany over the preparation for an invasion of Iraq, which unfolded in March 2003 onwards. By the time of the presidential election in November 2004, John Kerry had been derided by right-wing and Republican supporting commentators as a candidate who could not be trusted to pursue the war on terror with sufficiently manly rigour. As the *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich noted, this strategy was designed to 'castrate' Kerry and to do so in ways that mobilised both homosexual and 'girly' insinuation. As Rich concluded, "No matter. Once Mr. Kerry usurped Howard Dean, whose wartime sojourn in Aspen made the president look like a Green Beret, the Bush campaign's principals and surrogates went into overdrive. Mr. Kerry was said to appear "French." (That's code for "faggy.") His alleged encounters with Botox and a Christophe hairdresser were dutifully clocked on Drudge. For Memorial Day weekend, the redoubtable *New York Post* published hypothetical barbecue memos for the two contenders, with Mr. Bush favoring sausage and beer (albeit nonalcoholic) and Mr. Kerry opting for frogs legs, chardonnay and crème brûlée" (Rich 2004).

Did it work? Kerry lost the 2004 presidential election after all and Bush served two terms. But perhaps that is the wrong question. Does it matter? Does it matter, in other words, that a presidential candidate was accused of being a 'girly-man'? It does matter a great deal when patriotism, nationalism and national security are informed and empowered by gender, race, sexuality, class, age and so on. As Jasbir Puar (2008) and others have noted, there are assemblages at play that position on the one hand Osama Bin Laden and others as 'faggots' while lionizing white heterosexual men (e.g. Todd 'Lets roll' Beamer) as the epitome of US strength and virtue. And US citizens such as Bradley/Chelsea Manning, and now Edward Snowden, have found themselves caught up in these expansive terrorist/security/gender/sexuality assemblages.

They are clearly not alone.

About the author:

Klaus Dodds is Professor of Geopolitics in the department of Geography at Royal Holloway University of London. He has published widely on geopolitics and the polar regions, and plays a key role in the MSc in Geopolitics and Security. He is author of many books, including *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP 2014) and *International Politics and Film* (Columbia University Press 2014 with Sean Carter).