
Sexing the Catastrophe

Susan Faludi

**Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in
Post-9/11 America**

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Reviewed by Marla Braverman

To the hammer, the saying goes, the whole world looks like a nail. To the radical feminist, we might add, the whole world smacks of gender politics—even the seemingly incongruous subject of America’s response to the trauma of September 11.

This is evidenced by Susan Faludi’s new book, *Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, in which the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist argues that a nation suddenly confronted with the fact of its vulnerability salvaged its insecurities by conveniently, if unwittingly, reenacting an old script, a kind of “foundational drama” circa the mid-1800s Wild West, when men were men and women were damsels in distress. With a few minor rewrites—president stands in for cowboy, Muslim terrorists for war-whooping Indians, and 9/11

widows for the helpless women of the homestead—America’s culture industry managed to re-conceive of the terrorist attacks as a bugle call for shoving women out of the public eye and back into the kitchen—where, presumably, they either contentedly made casseroles for their families or ate humble pie for putting their careers before their biological clocks.

The denigration of strong females and concomitant beatification of “Betty Crocker domesticity” is familiar territory for Faludi, whose 1991 best seller, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, claimed that a similar effort by America’s media, popular culture, and political life to roll back feminism’s hard-won gains was under way in the 1980s. Then as now, she displays the same indefatigable talent for scouring a diverse array of media—*Terror Dream* even features a chapter on comic books—for examples of both overt and covert gender discrimination. Her new book also displays the same searing, sarcastic tone and fondness for chapters

that read more like deluges of examples than the rising tide of an argument.

Yet here Faludi has set herself an even more ambitious goal than simply exposing the myriad ways in which Americans were summoned—or scared—into reinhabiting traditional gender roles in the wake of September 11. Instead, she seeks to trace the historical provenance of America's reaction to catastrophe, to fling open the nation's proverbial closet and force it to acknowledge its mythological skeletons. In particular, she attempts to prove that the country's reflexive response to the terrorist attacks—enter John Wayne and Doris Day stage right, exit all feminists stage left—forms “a coherent and inexorable whole, the cumulative elements of a national fantasy... [an] elaborately constructed myth of invincibility.” In other words, America reacts to trauma “not by interrogating it, but by cocooning ourselves in the celluloid chrysalis of the baby boom's childhood”—that is, the fifties Western.

To that end, she takes us on a guided tour from Ground Zero back through America's original wilderness experience, pointing out parallels between each period's “rescue fantasies” and the types of men and women who starred in them—all of which makes for an interesting, if nonetheless deeply flawed, reading of

post-9/11 America. Though Faludi is undeniably creative in diagnosing America's alleged mental illness, she falls glaringly short when it comes to suggesting treatment. Indeed, if Faludi's book can be said to be evidence of anything, it is that while much of today's academic feminism may be ingenious at interpreting narratives on a page, it is sadly, even dangerously inept when it comes to acknowledging—let alone responding to—the complex realities of our time.

Soon after the attacks on the World Trade Center, a reporter pursuing a “reaction story” called Faludi for her response. Explaining that she was initially perplexed by his choice of respondents—she was, after all, hardly an expert on terrorism—she soon realized that such journalists had a very different agenda: “Well,” he exclaimed, “this sure pushes feminism off the map!” And indeed, as Faludi seeks to demonstrate in the first half of her book, that's just what it did. “Of all the peculiar responses our culture manifested to 9/11,” she writes, “perhaps none was more incongruous than the desire to rein in a liberated female population.”

This “reining in” took several forms, which Faludi describes as “a discounting of female opinions, a demeaning of the female voice, and a general shrinkage of the female

profile.” Pointing out that such major newspapers as the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* expanded their opinion sections in the days and weeks following September 11, Faludi derides the accompanying contraction of columns authored by women. She complains that 75 percent of Sunday talk shows featured, in the first six months after the attacks, no female guests at all. And those women who did dare to make their voices heard, let alone—as Faludi rather euphemistically puts it—“challenge the party line,” were greeted with a torrent of wrath: Think Susan Sontag’s famous article for *The New Yorker*, which placed the blame for the attacks on “specific American alliances and actions,” and *Nation* columnist Katha Pollitt’s declaration that the American flag, which her daughter sought to fly from their apartment window as a statement of national unity, was historically a symbol of “vengeance and war.” These statements, which to much of the public felt like sanctimonious preaching in the face of undeserved tragedy, were, to Faludi’s mind, disparaged primarily because they were made by feminist-minded women.

Moreover, continues Faludi, when they weren’t disenfranchising women’s opinions on op-ed pages or talk shows, the media were busy guiding women “toward a new veneration of

the virtues of nesting.” In an effort to restore the illusion of “a mythic America where women needed men’s protection and men succeeded in providing it,” newspapers and magazines across the country banged out article after article on lonely urban singles, the “return” of long-term relationships, and career women seized by “baby panic,” having put off marriage and children for the sake of professional advancement during their (supposedly) most fertile years. The jewels in the nesting trend’s crown, however, were the “opt-out revolution” stories, which argued that increasing numbers of highly educated, professionally successful women were choosing full-time motherhood over careers. The fact that none of these claims was backed up by data—a point Faludi laudably, if a bit shrilly, makes—was but a forgotten endnote to their burgeoning popularity in the post-9/11 years.

According to Faludi, the need to check “overbearing womanhood” stemmed from the notion that what *really* lay at the root of America’s failure to prevent the terrorist attacks was a “feminized” society—an America that, lacking in masculine fortitude (and browbeaten by angry, affirmative action crazy feminists), had gone soft. For every “opt-out revolution” story, then, there was a “virile renaissance” companion piece, decrying

the end of the sensitive, touchy-feely, “shaved-and-waxed” male era and the beginning of the “alpha male comeback.” Thus did America—or at least that segment of it represented by the right-wing media—suddenly find itself worshipping strange idols, such as leading government hawks Donald Rumsfeld (“America’s New Pin-Up”), Rudy Giuliani (“America’s Tower of Strength”), and, of course, the president himself, dubbed the nation’s Lone Ranger in the fight against foreign evil, whose once famous unintelligibility and cartoonish diction morphed overnight into the kind of straight-talking, straight-shooting qualities most admired in the cowboys of yesteryear.

Arguably, few males fit the alpha male bill better than New York’s finest, who were, Faludi complains, practically apotheosized by the media for months after the attacks—to the point where legitimate criticism of their rescue operation, such as their lack of working radios, either went unheeded or was deliberately quelled. The same went for the “heroes of Flight 93,” honored, Faludi believes, less for their fight against their hijackers than for their battle in the larger “war against the wasting disease suspected to have overtaken the male professional class.... By taking on the terrorists, the white-collar men of Flight 93 were assuring their brethren that the ‘feminized society’

wasn’t irreversible after all.” It therefore comes as little surprise to Faludi that the *female* heroes of September 11—the six female rescue workers at Ground Zero, for instance, or the Flight 93 stewardesses who planned to use pots of boiling water as weapons—didn’t come in for similar accolades. Instead, the women deemed worthy of praise were the “perfect virgins of grief,” the 9/11 widows who were at home on the day of the attacks, tending to the hearth, and whose sole ambition in the wake of the nation’s tragedy was to laud the valor of the men they had lost. “The widows were the wounded site of the attack,” concludes Faludi, “the violated motherland, expected to await decorously and passively the rescue by the masculine nation.”

To Faludi, this fixation on restoring an “invincible manhood” by means of a retreat to fifties-era tropes of femininity in fact belonged to a longstanding American pattern of response to threat, one immortalized on the silver screen by the 1956 classic *The Searchers*. “The Super Cult movie of the New Hollywood,” according to a film survey quoted by Faludi, *The Searchers* tells the story of Ethan Edwards’ (played by John Wayne) obsessive search for his niece, captured in an Indian raid as a young girl. This narrative, Faludi writes, is America’s

oldest national myth, a formulaic attempt to allay societal fears of insecurity by prevailing over terrorists and saving the girl:

We perceive our country as inviolable, shielded from enemy penetration. Indeed, in recent history the United States has been, among nations, one of the most immune to attack on its home soil. And yet, our foundational drama as a society was apposite, a profound exposure to just such assaults, murderous homeland incursions by dark-skinned, non-Christian combatants under the flag of no recognized nation, complying with no accepted rules of Western engagement and subscribing to an alien culture, who attacked white America on its “own” soil and against civilian targets. September 11 was aimed at our cultural solar plexus precisely because it was an “unthinkable” occurrence for a nation that once could think of little else. It was not, in fact, an inconceivable event; it was *the* characteristic and formative American ordeal, the primal injury of which we could not speak, the shard of memory stuck in our throats.

Indeed, writes Faludi, the chastened singles and “weeping widows” who populated the post-9/11 landscape had a legion of historical sisters, women whose supporting role in the original American “rescue fantasy” was crucial to the nation’s efforts to restore its own sense of invincibility—even,

perhaps especially, when they hardly needed saving.

Take, for instance, the case of Cynthia Ann Parker, the real-life inspiration for *The Searchers*, who, captured by Comanche warriors in 1836 at the age of nine, grew to love her adopted tribe, eventually married its chief and bore him three children, and then, confronted with “salvation” decades later, fought desperately against rejoining white society. Or Mary Rowlandson, the Puritan minister’s wife who used her ingenuity to keep herself alive during her ordeal among hostile Indian captors and negotiated her own release. Or Hannah Duston, who took an axe to her Indian abductors while they slept, even managing to scalp them for good measure. In short, by Faludi’s reckoning, the women of the wild frontier managed to take care of themselves quite nicely, thank you very much. If their narratives of cunning and courage have come down to us as stereotypical “redemption tales,” in which the brawny white male rescues the helpless female, it is only because American men sought to counter their humiliation at having failed to protect their wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters from attack by “savages” in the first place. Then as now, Faludi concludes, if anything needed saving, it was the American male ego from itself.

There is no doubt that Faludi's newest work is inventive, albeit in both senses of the word. Her ability to draw endless historical comparisons—President Bush to Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone; Jessica Lynch to Cynthia Ann Parker; “security moms” to Puritan female exemplars; and even the attack on the Twin Towers to the “surprise” Indian raid on Deerfield, Massachusetts, in 1704—is admittedly impressive and frequently entertaining. Yet if the pieces of Faludi's historical puzzle seem to fit together a bit *too* well, it is likely because she is exceedingly selective with the facts and anecdotes she uses to build her case.

She complains, for instance, that female politicians were given the cold shoulder in the wake of September 11, but makes no mention of female politicians such as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who played a crucial role in shaping America's response to the attacks, and the powerful Democratic senator and presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton. She also laments the rise of tough-guy “Neanderthal TV,” while ignoring a string of recent hit shows with strong female leads, such as “The Closer,” “Women's Murder Club,” “Private Practice,” “Commander in Chief,” “Alias,” and “The Bionic Woman,” to name just a few.

Perhaps the clearest example of her one-dimensional reading of the facts

at hand is her summary of the plot of *The Searchers*, on whose narrative rests her entire argument for default gender roles. She hints at a simplistic story of masculine virtues, when in truth it is anything but. Wayne's Ethan Edwards is not portrayed, as Faludi insists, as “heroic,” nor is he, for most of the film, “the consummate effective protector.” Rather, he is a nasty, violent man who seeks to kill his niece on account of her rape at Indian hands and subsequent shaming of his family. Moreover, it is only once he finds her that empathy awakens within him, and although he does end up rescuing her, in the final shot he wanders off alone, exiled from his family once more. This is hardly the triumphant he-man-rescues-helpless-woman tale Faludi would have us believe it to be. As with most of the evidence she puts forth, there is no fact too contrary to be conveniently left out or too undermining to be glossed over. She seems to be hoping that by simply lobbying enough favorable examples at the reader, he will be too overwhelmed to question the veracity of her argument as a whole.

Faludi also exhibits the unfortunate tendency to write herself into a corner, as the very evidence she marshals to shore up her argument often has the effect of undermining it. This is the case, for instance, with her lengthy description of the

Jersey Girls, a group of 9/11 widows who pieced together a timeline of the federal blunders leading up to the terrorist attacks. The Jersey Girls transformed themselves into investigators who “seemed to know more than their official counterparts,” and Faludi argues that their “violation of the script”—that is, their political independence and rejection of the “my government knows best” attitude—was cause for widespread censure from those in government and the media alike. And yet, she herself concedes that the Jersey Girls played an essential role in forcing the creation of the 9/11 commission through “what was widely recognized as a powerful address” before Congress.

Then there is Faludi’s tendency to recycle old arguments, rendering them even less persuasive. She claims, for example, that the “opt-out revolution” stories were the result of the media’s efforts to play on post-9/11 anxieties and that even post-9/11 fashions were bent on returning women to their inner Victorian Angel of the House. Yet her own *Backlash* maintained that in the 1980s—a period absent the fears associated with terrorist threats—the media were also trumpeting tales of professional women’s alleged return to the home, and fashion designers were trying to “corset” liberated women with their creations.

Finally, Faludi’s over-the-top contempt for the Bush administration and her intimations that America is the true “oppressor” of everything and everyone will likely only encourage those readers of a different political persuasion to write off her arguments as ideologically inspired. Like all those on the far Left, she is hard-pressed to find anything praiseworthy about American actions post-9/11—just as she has nary a harsh word for the jihadists who forced America’s hand. She boils at the curtailing of civil liberties, seethes at the “authorization of torture,” and rails at the scandal of Abu Ghraib and “our reckless fool’s errand into Iraq.” Nowhere, however, does she express a similar fury toward Osama Bin Laden, and nowhere does she rage against the tyranny of Saddam Hussein. Indeed, in one of the most egregious examples of ideological obduracy, she complains that American policies only made matters worse for Iraqi women, going so far as to imply that the American overthrow of Saddam’s regime is to blame for a sharp rise in rapes, abductions, and sexual slavery in Iraq—a country, that is, whose deposed despot’s son was a well-known maniacal rapist and sadist.

The same goes for the Taliban, responsible for many of the worst human rights abuses against women in recent decades. Once again, instead

of rejoicing at the United States military's overthrow of this women-hating regime, Faludi complains petulantly that the administration didn't really do it for the women. Sadly, Faludi seems to belong to that camp—of which many academic feminists are fellow members—which would prefer to see an “evil” America humbled at all costs, even, so it would seem, if it means leaving millions of oppressed Muslim women to their own devices. It is, therefore, one of the sadder ironies of *Terror Dream* that in using the tragedy of September 11 to further her own political positions, Faludi displays a flagrant disregard for one of feminism's animating principles: the belief in interventionism as a means of ensuring gender equality.

Finally, if Faludi is long on criticism for America's response to September 11, she completely fails when it comes to proposing alternatives. She concludes, for example, that

faced with a replay of our formative experience, we have the opportunity to resolve the old story in a new way that honors the country and its citizens.... September 11 offers us, even now, the chance to revisit that past and reverse that long denial, to imagine a national identity grounded not on virile illusion but on the talents and vitality of all of us equally, men and women both.

This is certainly a noble sentiment in itself. But what of the war cry of

al-Qaida and its jihadist supporters the world over? Can the responsible answer to the murder of three thousand civilians really be determining the root of our gender hang-ups? Indeed, the most disturbing aspect of *Terror Dream* lies in its tenacious insistence on remaining firmly rooted in the world of the abstract, the metaphorical, and the hypothetical at a historical moment crying out for a practical response. Faludi may believe that her post-9/11 call for America to confront its sexual anxieties is as important as confronting the enemy bent on its destruction. In truth, her insistence on navel-gazing in the face of Islamist threats to Western civilization—and, by extension, to women's freedom—belies a dire and dangerous crisis of values within today's academic feminism.

Toward the end of *Terror Dream*, Faludi wonders what might have happened if America hadn't, in the wake of September 11, “retreated into... fictions,” and had instead taken the attack “as an occasion to ‘confront the truth.’” We might ask Faludi the same question. For while her newest book is undeniably a feat of rhetoric and research, it is also a stubborn refusal to engage with the vital realities of our times. If anything, it is a determined attempt to *reject* the notion that the post-9/11 world is different, after all. Herein

lies perhaps the biggest clue to the mystery of Faludi's strange insistence on portraying American history as one big rerun at precisely the moment when the chasm between "before" and "after" never loomed so enormous: By claiming that it is all and has always been about gender inequality, Faludi can shore up her own relevance at a time when many are convinced of feminism's utter marginality.

This is truly a shame. For while September 11 may not have "pushed feminism off the map," there is no doubt that it has challenged it, along with many other ideologies and world-views, to prove its relevancy through a reexamination of its core principles. In the case of feminism, those principles once included—and can include again—a belief in moral absolutes as protectors of women's freedom and security; a dedication to liberal democracy as the best means of ensuring women's rights; a commitment to effecting practical improvement in the here-and-now world in which real women live; and, finally, a willingness to cross ideological and political lines for the sake of the greater good. When these are its driving forces, there is no end to what feminism can accomplish. As feminist scholar Christina Hoff Sommers pointed out in a May

2007 article in *The Weekly Standard*, in 1997 the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) combined forces with Mavis and Jay Leno to create a national awareness campaign aimed at fighting the mistreatment of women in the Muslim world. The FME, in collaboration with various human rights groups, also played a vital role in convincing the United States to deny formal recognition to the Taliban, and persuaded the oil company UNOCAL not to build a pipeline across Afghanistan, all in protest of the Taliban's abuses of Afghani women. These are excellent examples, Sommers concludes, of "what can be achieved when a women's group seriously seeks to address the mistreatment of women outside the United States."

By failing to rise to the occasion and breathe new life into feminism's animating principles, Faludi has done feminism, and women the world over, a great disservice. For much of the world needs feminism now more than ever, particularly those women in Muslim countries whose oppression is far greater—indeed, far more *real*—than anything Americans could ever dream of.

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