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A RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR ROSE'S *DECONSTRUCTING TRUTH*

CAROL BURKE*

In the spirit of scholarly debate on which the Journal of Women and the Law was founded, Dr. Burke, author of Camp All-American, Hanoi Jane, and the High-and-Tight: Gender, Folklore, and Changing Military Culture, offers the following response to Professor Rose.

Professor Rose concedes my “primary thesis”¹ and grants that my book has done a credible job of presenting arguments for change. I welcome Professor Rose’s endorsement of my accounts of prisoners of war, the military’s transformation of citizens into soldiers, and the case of Admiral Jeremy Boorda, one of the Navy’s advocates for an expansion of women’s roles after the infamous Tailhook scandal. Professor Rose’s praise is diluted by three major criticisms. He objects to: (1) my inclusion of evidence of military culture from service academies, (2) my chapter on a Canadian special forces unit, one whose culture, Professor Rose contends, bears no similarity to American military culture, and (3) my “feminist perspective” and “deconstructive process.”²

To eliminate the service academy from any discussion of military culture would be to ignore the dominant mechanism for the institutional legitimization of the tradition on which that culture depends. Founded on the model of the British boys school, the service academy continues to function as one of the military’s elite institutions. Whether the Sparta on the Hudson, the Athens on the Severn, or the mountain resort in Colorado Springs, today’s service academy exists to secure tradition and to serve, as George W. Bush put it in his commencement speech at West Point in 2002, as “the guardian of values that have shaped the soldiers who have shaped the history of the world.”³ The fundamental reasons for the continued existence

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1. Charles H. Rose III, *Deconstructing Truth: A Review of Carol Burke’s Book Camp All-American, Hanoi Jane, and the High-and-Tight: Gender, Folklore, and Changing Military Culture*, 12 WM. & MARY J. WOMEN & L. 481, 490 (2006).

2. *Id.* at 481.

3. President George W. Bush, Remarks by President Bush at 2002 Graduation Exercise of the United States Military Academy (June 1, 2002), available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html>.

of the academies is the same: to reproduce the distinctive culture of the nation's armed forces. Each does so by carefully preserving, if not openly condoning, those public traditions and private rites that give rank the aura of class, and class the mystique of the cultic. By slow and grudging adaptation, our military academies have survived the rationalization of officer training that has been the mission and the success of OCS and ROTC, where smart, ambitious students can become savvy, confident officers at a fraction of the cost. In 2003, the General Accounting Office calculated the cost of producing a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at a whopping \$349,327.⁴ Although the service academies together furnish fewer than a quarter of the officers needed by the services each year, and although critics periodically call for their closure, service academies are in no danger of extinction.

Graduates of the academies, "ring knockers," as they are called by the sailors and soldiers who serve under them, take their culture with them as an institutionally endorsed set of practices to be emulated. But the traffic is not just one-way. "Prior enlisteds," who come to the service academies through a special program, bring enlisted culture from the fleet and the field. It was in 1990 that I first received a copy of lyrics to the sadomasochist song, which proudly announces its deviance in its title, *The S&M Man*, cited by Professor Rose in note 28. But at the academy the song was an expression of group solidarity not individual deviance. It was given to me by a member of the Naval Academy Glee Club along with other bawdy songs the group typically sang on their bus trips home from performances — the kind of youthful fun that the Navy does not officially approve but which continues. A year later, an enlisted soldier who had served in Operation Desert Storm produced the same lyrics as part of a Xeroxed unit song book. I certainly would not be surprised to discover it alive and well among troops serving in the current war in Iraq. These songs have a long history of circulation. The most famous marching chant to come out of the Vietnam War employs the chilling refrain: "Napalm sticks to ribs, napalm sticks to kids." Marines reported to me as recently as last year that they were still performing the chant thirty years after any napalm rained down on Vietnam. Folklore passes from one generation of military personnel to the next, and unlike official communication, it travels easily up and down the chain of command. It exists

4. U.S. GEN. ACCOUNTING OFFICE, *MILITARY EDUCATION: DOD NEEDS TO ENHANCE PERFORMANCE GOALS AND MEASURES TO IMPROVE OVERSIGHT OF MILITARY ACADEMIES* 8 (2003), available at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d031000.pdf>.

for a purpose — to express frustrations and resentments that are often proscribed.

Folklore travels internationally wherever English speakers interact. Anyone who looks at the history of American bawdy songs will discover a shared body of folk song in Britain, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. Les Cleveland's study, *Dark Laughter*,⁵ illustrates the ways in which different English-speaking militaries share a song tradition filled with the irreverent and the obscene. Professor Rose objects to any connections between U.S. military culture and the Canadian special forces depicted in my chapter on initiation rituals, *Sex, GI's and Videotape*. The Canadian special forces unit was disbanded not after a Somali youth in its custody was beaten to death but after a videotape of one of its initiation rituals appeared on the nightly news and shocked the nation.⁶ Comparing initiation rituals of the Canadian, American and Australian militaries, according to Professor Rose, "is a lot like mixing apples and oranges, both are a type of fruit, but the similarities generally stop there."⁷ Not quite. Certainly national militaries have different histories, yet they share, with other all-male groups uncannily similar initiation rituals. I offer considerable scholarship in support of this connection, namely the work of VanGennep, Mead, Turner, and Bettelheim. Subjected to mental and physical stress, smeared with filth and waste, infantilized, and feminized by harsh and exacting overseers, initiates are symbolically stripped of their former selves in order to acquire a new self, fit for difficult and dangerous tasks that the group must undertake. Out of context, ceremonies that mix the homoerotic and the humiliating might shock some, but such practices have enjoyed a long history in male groups and, despite official interdictions, have persisted in the U.S. military long past the integration of women into the ranks. Taken as a whole, these initiations abject the unreliable ego so as to restore the transformed subject, disciplined and dedicated to the corps: the boy is welcomed as a man, the civilian as a soldier, and the solitary fellow as a brother — identities that will bind on the battlefield and endure for a lifetime. The problem with such time-honored traditions, whether they take place in the gender-integrated militaries of our allies or of our own, is that they don't work their bonding magic with women present, because the point of such initiations is to cast out the female, not form lasting bonds between men and women. The initiate goes through a

5. LES CLEVELAND, *DARK LAUGHTER: WAR IN SONG AND POPULAR CULTURE* (1994).

6. See Allan Thompson, *General's Resignation Refused De Chastelain Accepting Blame for Vile Video Enough for PM*, TORONTO STAR, Feb. 1, 1995, at A3.

7. Rose, *supra* note 1, at 488.

second birth, one not at the hands of women, that transforms him into a man, a frat brother, or a member of the corps, whether one is Canadian, American, British, or Australian.

It is important not to forget that apples and oranges are both fruit, just as it is important to remember that the Canadian cadets who perform such rituals are, like the American midshipmen who sing the S&M tunes, men, and just as it is important to remember that those who are excluded from the rituals and are the targets of the songs are women. To make such *general* claims is, I take it, what gives my work its “feminist slant.”⁸ It is hard to imagine a reader of the *Journal of Women and the Law* who wouldn’t know the meaning of feminism, but Professor Rose, nevertheless, offers the Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary’s definition: “the theory of political, economic, and social equality of the sexes.”⁹ It’s hard to see what his gripe is with a feminism so defined since he affirms that “[t]he United States must guarantee fairness and opportunity for all members of the armed forces, regardless of their race, gender, or sexual orientation.”¹⁰ But for Professor Rose, affirmation is one thing, and advocacy another. For him, any advocacy of equal opportunity, equal treatment, and equal rewards for women in the military must be subordinated to the paralytic notion that one must see every issue from both a male and a female perspective. Unfortunately, what looks fair from a male perspective often looks unjust from a woman’s perspective, and the injustice is only maintained by misplaced effort at balance. It is true that large numbers of positions previously reserved for military men have opened up for military women in the past twenty years (with great reluctance and as the result of strong advocacy by men and women with a “feminist slant” inside and outside the service). Yet the Department of Defense continues to deny women opportunities in the combat arms and on submarines.¹¹

Although he may wish that discrimination based on sexual orientation did not exist, Professor Rose, whose twenty-two year career in the Army ended in December 2004, is certainly aware that the Pentagon’s infamous “Don’t ask, Don’t tell, Don’t pursue” policy has resulted in the discharge over 10,000 service members.¹² For

8. Rose, *supra* note 1, at 487.

9. *Id.* at 481 n.1 (citing MERRIAM WEBSTER’S COLLEGIATE DICTIONARY 428 (10th ed. 1993)).

10. *Id.* at 483 (citations omitted).

11. See, e.g., Vickie Nielsen, *Women in Uniform*, 49 NATO Review 26, 26 (2001), available at <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2001/0102-09.htm>.

12. SERVICEMEMBERS LEGAL DEF. NETWORK, TOTAL “DON’T ASK, DON’T TELL” DISCHARGES 1994-2004 (2005), http://www.sldn.org/binary-data/SLDN_ARTICLES/pdf_file/1455.pdf (last visited Jan. 25, 2006) (listing the number of discharges at 10,335 during the first ten years the policy has been in place).

Professor Rose the question of fairness is a "question of evolution, not revolution,"¹³ and he criticizes me for failing to show that individual leaders have "attempted recently to create a fair and equitable environment."¹⁴ I don't deny that there are dedicated and fair members of the military (Professor Rose no doubt considers himself one of them) who value the service of women and do everything they can to treat subordinates fairly within an institution that, regrettably, continues to practice systematic discrimination by excluding women from certain positions, regardless of their abilities and skills, and summarily discharges those who admit to being gay.

My work documents an unofficial culture of hyper-masculinity that persists despite efforts to proscribe it. Professor Rose does not dispute the veracity of the examples I offer as evidence of such a culture; he objects to their shocking nature. What would Professor Rose have me do, omit the truth to soften the blow? I am a folklorist who has investigated the military as an occupational folk group. Although the popular conception of folklore as a set of reassuring tales that appeals to the sentimental and that celebrates a simpler time may enjoy wide currency, what any folklorist understands is that the folklore and the folk practices of contemporary groups, particularly occupational groups, are often filled with the irreverent and the subversive. If one studied the slang and the jokes of urban police forces, would one be surprised to find some evidence of sexism or racism? Should a folklorist who uncovers such material excise it from any publication because those who administer the police department, those who have the power to transform it, might be offended? Sometimes the military is mesmerized by its own hierarchy. Just because those at the top have spoken out against sexist behavior, have condemned sexist language, and have instituted mandatory training sessions, doesn't mean that sexism is eliminated. Where it persists we need to face it.

Take the example of a simple marching chant, one that no one would find particularly shocking but one that recruits today sing in basic training programs across the services. A drill sergeant leads his gender-integrated group of trainees in a chant, "Cindy, Cindy, Cindy Lou. Love my rifle more than you. You used to be my beauty queen. Now I love my M-16." It's one thing for a woman to sing of loving her rifle in training; it's another to mourn the loss of her Cindy Lou. Lest Professor Rose imply that such marching chants are a thing

13. Rose, *supra* note 1, at 483 n.13.

14. *Id.* at 483.

of the past, one need look no further than Kayla Williams's 2005 memoir, *Love My Rifle More Than You*,¹⁵ which appeared too late for inclusion in my book, but which confirms with its firsthand testimony the pervasiveness of the kind of dehumanizing masculinist rituals that I document. Williams's book recounts her year as an enlisted Army soldier and Arabic linguist in Iraq, a year she spent in "a weird little microcosm of society on steroids,"¹⁶ one in which women were either "slut[s]" or "bitch[es]"¹⁷ and the men in her unit collected \$80 and a bag of M&M's to bribe her to show them her breasts,¹⁸ and one in which her gender was used to humiliate interrogated Iraqis who were stripped naked before her.¹⁹ For her part, Williams was instructed to hurl insults at the genitalia of the naked prisoners.²⁰ Unfortunately, the use of female military personnel in this way was not limited to the prison in Mosul where Williams was enlisted to help out, but it surfaced in the photos of the Abu Ghraib prison abuse and in reports of treatment at Guantanamo. When "the gloves came off," gender was consciously employed as a torture technique. Yes, my example is shocking as are the 350 reported cases of sexual assault among armed forces serving in the Afghanistan/Iraq war.²¹ "Friendly fire" has one meaning for male soldiers and quite another for women. Despite the many positive efforts of those in positions of power in today's military, equality and opportunity for women fall short of their fellow men in uniform.

Professor Rose wants me to step back from what looks bad up close and report the good news from the macro level. We have all heard those cheerful reports before from the superintendents of each of the service academies — not just the Naval Academy — from the heads of the services, and from the civilian command, after the revelations of yet another scandal in the bases, the prisons, or the battlefield. I am mystified about what he means by his title, "Deconstructing the Truth" or by his depiction of my method as a "deconstructive process."²² The implication of the label, I fear, is

15. KAYLA WILLIAMS: *LOVE MY RIFLE MORE THAN YOU: YOUNG AND FEMALE IN THE U.S. ARMY* (2005).

16. *Id.* at 278.

17. *Id.* at 13.

18. *Id.* at 23.

19. *Id.* at 247-48

20. *Id.*

21. Although the Department of Defense reported in February 2005 that it had received reports of 253 cases of sexual assault, the Miles Foundation, a private, non-profit organization that provides services to victims of violence associated with the military, reports 350 cases as of January 20, 2006. E-mail from the Miles Foundation to the author (Jan. 20, 2006) (on file with author).

22. Rose, *supra* note 1, at 481.

that for a folklorist to take a point of view that differs from the official, “balanced” version of reality is somehow to bend or distort the truth. As an ethnographer — not a deconstructive theorist or Beltway policy-maker — my rule of thumb is much more modest: you can’t know the truth until you recover it, and when you do you can’t avert your eyes just because you don’t like what you see.