

## **Gender and the Nuclear Weapons State:**

### **A Feminist Critique of the UK Government's White Paper on Trident**

**Abstract:** *This paper enquires into the connections between gender and discourses of the nuclear weapons state. Specifically, we develop an analysis of the ways in which gender operates in the White Paper published by the UK Government in 2006 on its plans to renew Trident nuclear weapons (given the go-ahead by the Westminster Parliament in March 2007). We argue that the White Paper mobilises masculine-coded language and symbols in several ways: firstly, in its mobilisation of techno-strategic rationality and axioms; secondly, in its assumptions about security; and, thirdly, in its assumptions about the state as actor. Taken together, these function to construct a masculinised identity for the British nuclear state as a 'responsible steward'. However, this identity is one that is not yet securely fixed and that, indeed, contains serious internal tensions that opponents of Trident (and of the nuclear state more generally), should be able to exploit.*

**Keywords:** gender, masculinity, discourse, nuclear weapons, Trident, feminist anti-militarism, UK

**Gender and the Nuclear Weapons State:  
A Feminist Critique of the UK Government's White Paper on Trident**

**Introduction**

This paper enquires into the connections between gender and discourses of the nuclear weapons state. Specifically, we develop an analysis of the ways in which gender operates in the recent White Paper, *The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent*<sup>1</sup>, which details the UK Government's plans to renew Trident nuclear weapons. We argue that the White Paper mobilises masculine-saturated codes and symbols about nuclear weapons, security and the state, in ways that show both continuity and change with the past and that function overall to construct a masculinised identity for the contemporary British nuclear state as a 'responsible steward'.<sup>2</sup> However, this identity is one that is not yet securely fixed; indeed, the codes and symbols of masculinity in the text are unstable and contradictory in ways that critics of Trident renewal should be able to exploit. There is space here for feminist analysis to contribute to the ongoing opposition to Trident and the nuclear weapons state more generally.<sup>3</sup>

---

1. Cm 6994. 2006. *The Future of the UK's Nuclear Deterrent*. Presented to Parliament by The Secretary of State for Defence and the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, By Command of Her Majesty. London: The Stationary Office. Online at [http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AC00DD79-76D6-4FE3-91A1-6A56B03C092F/0/DefenceWhitePaper2006\\_Cm6994.pdf](http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AC00DD79-76D6-4FE3-91A1-6A56B03C092F/0/DefenceWhitePaper2006_Cm6994.pdf) (last accessed 04/06/2008).

2. Although it may be technically more correct to use UK rather than Britain (the UK being the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland), when we use 'British' in this article it should be taken to mean 'belonging to the UK'.

3. In this spirit, the first draft of this paper was presented at the Second International Faslane Academic Conference and Blockade, held outside Faslane Naval Base, Scotland, 27 June 2007.

We write from the perspective of a 'feminist anti-militarism',<sup>4</sup> which 'rejects both the military and political use of weapons of mass destruction in warfare or for deterrence. It is also deeply critical of the discourses which have framed public discussion of weapons of mass destruction'.<sup>5</sup> Developing out of a long tradition of feminist involvement in peace and anti-war movements,<sup>6</sup> this position is feminist because it sees *gender* as playing a key role in war, in the culture of readiness and enthusiasm for war known as militarism, and in the reliance on 'weapons of mass destruction' like Trident.

What is gender? Feminists now offer multiple and sometimes conflicting accounts of this key concept.<sup>7</sup> Following Carol Cohn, perhaps the most important writer on gender and nuclear weapons, we want to emphasise three dimensions here.<sup>8</sup> Firstly, gender as a category helps us understand the ways in which individual (and collective) identity is socially constructed around and through assumptions about male/female sexual difference, or the categories of masculinity and femininity. Secondly, gender is 'a way of structuring relations of power',<sup>9</sup> one which most feminists agree 'shows constancy in assigning greater value to that which is associated with masculinity and lesser value to that associated with femininity ... the terms are not independent but form a

---

4. Cynthia Cockburn, 2003. "Why Feminist Anti-Militarism?," Women in Black. Online at <http://www.womeninblack.org.uk/Feminist%20Antimilitarism.htm> (last accessed 04/06/2008).

5. Carol Cohn and Sara Ruddick, "A Feminist Ethical Perspective on Weapons of Mass Destruction," in S. Lee and S. Hasmi (eds) *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), online at:

[http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/wapp/research/working/cohn\\_ruddick.pdf](http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/wapp/research/working/cohn_ruddick.pdf) (accessed 08/06/2007).

6. e.g. Sasha Roseneil, *Disarming Patriarchy: Feminism and Political Action at Greenham*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995).

7. e.g. Judith Squires, *Gender in Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999) and Barbara Marshall, *Configuring Gender: Explorations in Theory and Practice* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000), ch 2.

8. Carol Cohn, with Felicity Hill and Sara Ruddick, "The Relevance of Gender for Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction," *Disarmament Diplomacy* Issue 80, 1-3, Autumn (2005), online at:

<http://www.acronym.org.uk/dd/dd80/80ccfhsr.htm> (accessed 08/07/2006).

9. *Ibid*

hierarchical (unequal) relation'.<sup>10</sup> Thirdly, 'gender also functions as a symbolic system: our ideas about gender permeate and shape our ideas about many other aspects of society beyond male-female relations—including politics, weapons, and warfare'.<sup>11</sup> This means that discourses about nuclear weapons, amongst other things, are infused with a series of conceptual dichotomies which flow from and underpin the primary signifiers of masculine/feminine, with the masculine side of the dichotomy favoured over the feminine.

We would add that feminist work has increasingly insisted on the complexity with which gender operates, intersecting with other forms of power and identity in context-specific ways. This means that we should not fall into the trap of thinking that there is only one form of masculinity and one of femininity—rather there are multiple versions of each, some of which are more dominant, or 'hegemonic', than others at particular places and times.<sup>12</sup> As a result, we should expect a particular gendered discourse to construct and mobilise markers and symbols of multiple and even conflicting masculinities and femininities.

There exists an extensive feminist critique of the nuclear weapons state, most of it generated during and focused on the Cold War period and particularly the roles and rhetoric of the superpowers at that time. What remains a pertinent question is the extent to which such feminist arguments can illuminate the more contemporary, British, case with which we are concerned in this paper. The UK jumped on the

---

10. V. Spike Peterson, and Anne Sisson Runyan, *Global Gender Issues* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), p.7.

11. Carol Cohn, with Felicity Hill and Sara Ruddick, "The Relevance of Gender for Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction", *Disarmament Diplomacy* Issue 80, 1, Autumn (2005) p.2, online at: <http://www.acronym.org.uk/dd/dd80/80ccfhsr.htm> (last accessed 04/06/2008).

12. R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987); R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

nuclear bandwagon early in the Cold War, allying itself closely to the US in order not only to contest a perceived Soviet threat but also to continue to project its power on a global stage at a time when it was losing its empire. In the latter stages of the Cold War, a belligerent Conservative Party government under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher renewed the UK's commitment to nuclear weapons, facilitating the establishment of US nuclear bases in the UK and upgrading British weapons to the current Trident system. In opposition during this period, the Labour Party was initially strongly wedded to the cause of unilateral nuclear disarmament. By the time it came to power in 1997, however, 'New' Labour had dropped this commitment to disarmament, to the continuing consternation of its left wing. The New Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair may have articulated a commitment to an 'ethical' dimension to its foreign policy<sup>13</sup> but disarmament has not been part of this agenda. Indeed, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Blair's efforts to reinforce the relationship with the US in its 'War on Terror', and involvement in US-led military action in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Labour government (now under Gordon Brown) is more wedded than ever to the British nuclear 'deterrent'. It is in this context that the White Paper on the renewal of Trident was published. The plans outlined within it were ultimately approved in March 2007 by the Westminster Parliament but only after a sizeable Labour Party rebellion, and they continue to garner controversy, particularly in Scotland, where all current British Trident submarines are based.<sup>14</sup>

---

13. Cook, R., 1997. "Robin Cook's Speech on the Government's Ethical Foreign Policy". Online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/indonesia/Story/0,2763,190889,00.html> (last accessed 04/06/2008)

14. See BBC, 2007, 'Trident Plans Win Commons Support', online at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/6448173.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6448173.stm) (last accessed 05/06/2008); Lindsay Gilmour, 2006, 'Faslane's Trident Dilemma', The Politics Show Scotland, online at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/nolpda/ifs\\_news/hi/newsid\\_6211000/6211510.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/nolpda/ifs_news/hi/newsid_6211000/6211510.stm) (last accessed 05/06/2008); The Scottish Government, 2007, 'Trident in Scotland', online at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2007/10/22111017> (last accessed 05/06/2008).

In what follows, we develop our analysis of the discourse in the White Paper in three parts. In the first, we discuss the representations of nuclear weapons technology in the White Paper; in the second, its arguments about security; and, in the third, its assumptions about the role of the state. We draw on feminist critiques of the Cold War nuclear arms race to make our analysis but also more broadly on recent feminist literature within the discipline of International Relations (IR) and sociological debates on multiple masculinities. We use this work to illuminate the gendered underpinnings of the White Paper; in so doing, we also aim to demonstrate the significance of feminism as an essential part of the ongoing struggle against the UK government's addiction to nuclear weapons—and against the nuclear weapons state more generally.

### **Part 1: Gender and Nuclear Weapons Technology**

We begin by looking at the way the White Paper talks about nuclear weapons technology. There are three strands to the feminist critique of the way in which states in general talk about nuclear weapons technology: first, the deployment of sexualised, phallic imagery; second, a tendency to abstraction; and, third, a reliance on gendered axioms. On the first point, feminists have long highlighted that the political and military power associated with nuclear weapons is linked metaphorically with sexual potency and masculinity. This linkage is neither arbitrary nor trivial: sexual metaphors are a way of mobilising gendered associations in order to create excitement about, support for and identification with both the weapons and the political regime possessing them.<sup>15</sup> Thus feminist histories of the development of the nuclear arms race in the decades after World War Two demonstrate the extent to which it was a

---

15. Carol Cohn, with Felicity Hill and Sara Ruddick, "The Relevance of Gender for Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction", *Disarmament Diplomacy* Issue 80, 1, Autumn (2005), p.4, online at <http://www.acronym.org.uk/dd/dd80/80ccfhsr.htm> (last accessed 05/06/2008).

race to prove masculine prowess, fuelled by ‘missile’ envy,<sup>16</sup> with the nuclear weapons of the Cold War superpowers ‘wheeled out like monumental phalluses’ on parade.<sup>17</sup> Such imagery has proved seductive to many governments across time and space. Thus when India exploded five nuclear devices in May 1998, Hindu nationalist leader Balashaheb Thakeray argued that ‘[w]e have to prove that we are not eunuchs’ and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was portrayed in a newspaper cartoon as propping up his coalition with a nuclear bomb, captioned ‘Made with Viagra’<sup>18</sup>. Indeed, as Indian novelist Arundhati Roy has commented:

Reading the papers, it was often hard to tell when people were referring to Viagra (which was competing for second place on the front pages) and when they were talking about the bomb—‘We have superior strength and potency.’<sup>19</sup>

Similar language has permeated the nuclear discourse of the military and defence industry. In her ground-breaking study of the discourse of American defence intellectuals who formulated nuclear weapons policy during the Cold War, Cohn

---

16. Helen Caldicott, *Missile Envy: The Arms Race and Nuclear War* (New York: Bantam, 1984) and Brian Easlea, *Fathering the Unthinkable: Masculinity, Scientists and the Nuclear Arms Race* (London: Pluto, 1983).

17. Cynthia Cockburn, “The Gender Dynamic”, *Peace News* Issue 2443, June-August, (2001), online at: [http://www.peacenews.info/issues/2443/guested\\_gd.html](http://www.peacenews.info/issues/2443/guested_gd.html) (last accessed 05/06/2008).

18. Cited in: Carol Cohn with Felicity Hill and Sara Ruddick. “The Relevance of Gender for Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction,” *Disarmament Diplomacy* Issue 80, 1, Autumn (2005) p.4, online at <http://www.acronym.org.uk/dd/dd80/80ccfhsr.htm> (accessed 8/7/06)

19. Arundhati Roy, *The Cost of Living* (London: Flamingo, 1999), p.136. See also Sikata Banerjee. *Warriors in Politics: Hindu Nationalism, Violence, and the Shiv Sena in Mumbai* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), pp.172-80; Amrita Basu and Rekha Basu, “Of Men, Women, and Bombs: Engendering India’s Nuclear Explosions,” online at <http://pagesperso-orange.fr/sacw/saan/AmritaBasu.html> (last accessed 30/09/2008); and Rupa Oza, *The Making of Neoliberal India: Nationalism, Gender, and the Paradoxes of Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2006), Chapter 5.

noted that sexualised metaphors, phallic imagery and the promise of sexual domination thrived.<sup>20</sup> Lectures were dominated by discussion of:

vertical erector launchers, thrust-to-weight ratios, soft lay downs, deep penetration, and the comparative advantages of protracted versus spasm attacks—or what one military adviser to the National Security Council has called ‘releasing 70 to 80 percent of our megatonnage in one orgasmic whump’.<sup>21</sup>

Cohn suggests that such sexual imagery serves not only to underline the connections between masculine sexuality and nuclear weapons but also to minimize the seriousness of militarist endeavours.<sup>22</sup> It makes the nuclear arms race seem the stuff of jocular locker-room rivalry, denying its deadly consequences. Perhaps most importantly, sexualised metaphors are one of the reasons that talk of nuclear disarmament is so readily dismissed. ‘If disarmament is emasculation, how could any real man even consider it?’<sup>23</sup>

The attachment of masculine potency to nuclear weapons can be seen to some extent in the White Paper, particularly when the more technological aspects of the proposed Trident renewal are discussed. Thus, for example, we note the roll call of past submarine names: Astute, Resolution, Swiftsure and Vanguard, connoting strength,

---

20. Carol Cohn, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defence Intellectuals,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12:4 (1987), pp.687-8

21. *Ibid.*, p. 693.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 696.

23. *Ibid.* p.693.

resolve and action.<sup>24</sup> The accompanying pictures recall the phallic iconography of the Cold War, with a Vanguard submarine emerging from foaming water and a missile being test fired into the sky.<sup>25</sup> Reference in this section and in technical discussion elsewhere in the paper is frequently made to the greater range and payload of contemporary ballistic missiles. Nonetheless, our overall impression is that the mobilisation of sexualised, masculine language and imagery is significantly more muted in the White Paper than feminist critics would perhaps expect. It would seem that there is a deliberate avoidance here of the more obviously masculine arguments and sexual metaphors, such as those about potency and penetration. Perhaps this is unsurprising from a Government that claims to have been more open to feminist arguments than its predecessors.<sup>26</sup>

Although it may not brandish more overt phallic imagery, it seems to us that the Government has not fully relinquished the masculine-coded prestige and status that is associated with the celebration of firepower. Although the White Paper explicitly denies this, again perhaps due to an awareness of the feminist critique, arguing that ‘we maintain our nuclear forces as a means of deterring acts of aggression and *not for reasons of status*’,<sup>27</sup> its acknowledgement of the special treatment afforded to nuclear weapons states indicates there is still pride in belonging to the club: ‘The NPT

---

24. See Section 1 of Cm 6994. 2006. *The Future of the UK's Nuclear Deterrent*. Presented to Parliament by The Secretary of State for Defence and the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, By Command of Her Majesty. London: The Stationary Office. Online at [http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AC00DD79-76D6-4FE3-91A1-6A56B03C092F/0/DefenceWhitePaper2006\\_Cm6994.pdf](http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AC00DD79-76D6-4FE3-91A1-6A56B03C092F/0/DefenceWhitePaper2006_Cm6994.pdf) (last accessed 04/06/2008).

25. *Ibid.* pp. 9-11.

26. Claire Annesley and Francesca Gains, “Feminising Politics and Policy: The Impact of New Labour”. Paper presented at the UK PSA Women and Politics Annual Conference, *Feminist Ethics, Feminist Politics and the States We're In*, 11 February (2006) Edinburgh. Online at: <http://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/gradschool/psafem/pdf/FeminisingPolitics.pdf> (last accessed 04/06/2008)

27. See p. 20, Cm 6994. 2006. *The Future of the UK's Nuclear Deterrent*. Presented to Parliament by The Secretary of State for Defence and the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, By Command of Her Majesty. London: The Stationary Office. Online at [http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AC00DD79-76D6-4FE3-91A1-6A56B03C092F/0/DefenceWhitePaper2006\\_Cm6994.pdf](http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AC00DD79-76D6-4FE3-91A1-6A56B03C092F/0/DefenceWhitePaper2006_Cm6994.pdf) (last accessed 04/06/2008). Emphasis added.

recognises the *UK's status* (along with that of the US, France, Russia and China) as a nuclear weapon state.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, there is a strong tension in the White Paper between the government's wish to maintain its masculinised pre-eminence as a nuclear state and its concurrent desire to claim the moral high ground with an ethical dimension to its foreign policy. There is an entire section of the White Paper, for example, devoted to the Government's efforts to work toward disarmament, counter-proliferation and its legal obligations,<sup>29</sup> indicating the importance of placating internal critics. Such considerations, however, cannot be allowed to trump the arguments for Trident renewal. The tension between the two claims to status in the international system—as a nuclear weapons state and as an ethical leader—can be seen in the close and rather jarring juxtaposition throughout the White Paper of statements about the importance of nuclear weapons with assertions of sharp reductions in their scale and readiness. One example of what amounts to a kind of paradoxical boasting about the smallness of the British nuclear armoury can be found in the Foreword, as then Prime Minister Tony Blair writes:

I believe it is crucial that, for the foreseeable future, British Prime Ministers have the necessary assurance that no aggressor can escalate a crisis beyond UK control. An independent deterrent ensures our vital interests will be safeguarded. But as before, it will be the minimum necessary. We already have the smallest stockpile of nuclear warheads among the recognised nuclear weapons States, and are the only one to have reduced to a single deterrent system.<sup>30</sup>

---

28. *Ibid.* p. 14, emphasis added.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 12-16.

30. *Ibid.* pp.5.

Such bland descriptors as “stockpiles” and “deterrent system” bring us to the second strand of the feminist critique of the way in which states talk about nuclear weapons technology: the tendency to use highly ‘abstract, euphemistic and acronym-ridden language’.<sup>31</sup> This point was developed by Cohn in her work on US defence intellectuals, in which she identified the deployment of terms such as ‘collateral damage’, ‘damage limitation weapon’ and ‘clean bombs’ as part of a discourse she labeled ‘technostrategic’.<sup>32</sup> Such a discourse leaves out ‘the emotional, the concrete, the particular, human bodies and their vulnerability, human lives and their subjectivity—all of which are marked [as] feminine’.<sup>33</sup> For a member of the defence community to speak of such things would mean they risk being discredited and disempowered in the male-dominated world in which they operate. Conversely, ignoring such things helps defence intellectuals insulate themselves from the realities and consequences of their work.

We suggest this dynamic can also be seen in the way the UK government talks about nuclear weapons in the White Paper. There are no more than a couple of fleeting references to the weapons’ uniquely ‘terrifying power’<sup>34</sup>—and those only to underscore their deterrent capacity against ‘a future aggressor’ and certainly not as a way of opening up discussion about their impact on human bodies and communities.

---

31. Carol Cohn, “Emasculating America’s Linguistic Deterrent”, in Adrienne Harris and Ynestra King (eds) *Rocking the Ship of State: Toward A Feminist Peace Politics*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), p.156.

32. Carol Cohn, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defence Intellectuals,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12:4 (1987).

33. Carol Cohn, Felicity Hill and Sara Ruddick, ‘The Relevance of Gender for Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction’, *Disarmament Diplomacy* Issue 80: 1, Autumn (2005) p.5, online at <http://www.acronym.org.uk/dd/dd80/80ccfhsr.htm> (last accessed 04/06/2008)

34. See pp 5 and 17 of Cm 6994. 2006. *The Future of the UK’s Nuclear Deterrent*. Presented to Parliament by The Secretary of State for Defence and the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, By Command of Her Majesty. London: The Stationary Office. Online at [http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AC00DD79-76D6-4FE3-91A1-6A56B03C092F/0/DefenceWhitePaper2006\\_Cm6994.pdf](http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AC00DD79-76D6-4FE3-91A1-6A56B03C092F/0/DefenceWhitePaper2006_Cm6994.pdf) (last accessed 04/06/2008).

Further, although the Government is keen to assert that it only wishes to have nuclear weapons as a deterrent, it also acknowledges that the concept of deterrence only makes sense if the threat of using the weapons is credible. This means it has to entertain the possibility of actually using them, albeit in a highly abstracted way in which the consequences of so doing are not discussed. Thus buried in the heart of the White Paper lies a statement implying the abandonment of the long-held second-strike doctrine and asserting the right to use nuclear weapons *pre-emptively*: ‘we will not rule in or out the first use of nuclear weapons’.<sup>35</sup>

This has enormous implications in terms of the supposedly defensive posture of the UK as well as potential human cost, but the employment of euphemisms such as ‘use of our nuclear deterrent’ and ‘use of our nuclear capabilities’<sup>36</sup> serves to obscure what is really being talked about here. Later the White Paper notes that ‘Any state that we can hold responsible for assisting a nuclear attack on our vital interests can expect that this would lead to a proportionate response’.<sup>37</sup> Again, the notion of a ‘proportionate response’ sounds appropriately reasonable and vague, and the realities of retaliation and nuclear war are neatly avoided. Similar moves are made during the more technical discussion of possible weapons systems. Look, for example, at the following statement: ‘We need to make a judgement on the minimum destructive capability necessary to provide an effective deterrent posture ... we believe that our existing capability to deploy up to 48 warheads on the submarine is sufficient’.<sup>38</sup> This sounds very restrained until we remember that 48 warheads comprise a total explosive power

---

35. *Ibid.* p. 18.

36. *Ibid.* p. 18.

37. *Ibid.* p. 19.

38. *Ibid.* p. 23.

of around 19 megatons (more than 1,400 times the power of the Hiroshima bomb, which killed 140,000 people).

Interestingly, Cohn argues that it is *not*, ultimately, technostrategic language that is mobilised to justify nuclear weapons and decisions about their deployment and use. Rather, defence intellectuals and others rely for this task on ‘much more primitive ambiguous and contradictory axioms’—by insisting, for example, on the importance of ‘enhancing our deterrence’ and ‘protecting our vital interests’.<sup>39</sup> As Cohn points out,<sup>40</sup> such axioms (assertions of fact or principle that are taken as self-evident, not requiring evidence or explanation), fail to provide grounds for discrimination between different defence systems; moreover they remove the need for explicit justification of the need for nuclear weapons in the first place. A reliance on axioms is particularly evident in the White Paper.<sup>41</sup> They include the following: ‘For 50 years our independent nuclear deterrent has provided the ultimate assurance of our national security’; ‘We believe that an independent British nuclear deterrent is an essential part of our insurance against the uncertainties and risks of the future’;<sup>42</sup> and most strikingly,

The fundamental principles relevant to nuclear deterrence have not changed since the end of the Cold War, and are unlikely to change in future ... Nuclear

---

39. Carol Cohn, “Emasculating America’s Linguistic Deterrent”, in Adrienne Harris and Ynestra King (eds) *Rocking the Ship of State: Toward A Feminist Peace Politics*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), p.158.

40. *Ibid.* pp.158-160.

41. This point is also made by Rebecca Johnson, “The UK White Paper on Renewing Trident: The Wrong Decision at the Wrong Time,” *Disarmament Diplomacy* issue 83, Winter (2006). Online at <http://www.acronym.org.uk/dd/dd83/83uk.htm> (last accessed 05/06/2008).

42. Both p.5 of Cm 6994. 2006. *The Future of the UK’s Nuclear Deterrent*. Presented to Parliament by The Secretary of State for Defence and the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, By Command of Her Majesty. London: The Stationary Office. Online at [http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AC00DD79-76D6-4FE3-91A1-6A56B03C092F/0/DefenceWhitePaper2006\\_Cm6994.pdf](http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AC00DD79-76D6-4FE3-91A1-6A56B03C092F/0/DefenceWhitePaper2006_Cm6994.pdf) (last accessed 04/06/2008).

weapons remain a necessary element of the capability we need to deter threats from others possessing nuclear weapons.<sup>43</sup>

As Cohn points out, such axioms operate in ‘a realm where gender is just below the surface’.<sup>44</sup> What she means by this is that the axioms gain their credence and ‘emotional valences’ because they mobilise underlying assumptions about the state and about security which are suffused with gendered, and specifically masculine imagery.<sup>45</sup> This is the third strand of the feminist critique of the way in which states talk about nuclear technology. Cohn’s assertion gains strong support from other feminist work, particularly that in the discipline of International Relations (IR), which has developed an extensive critique of the gendered underpinnings of dominant conceptions of both the state and security. Such work focuses its critique particularly on Realism, a school of thought that sees the world as an anarchic system of self-interested states struggling to defend themselves through military power. Since World War Two, Realism has been the dominant approach in IR as well as among statesmen, policy makers and defence intellectuals, and the UK is no exception. As we will show below, the Realist world view is a masculinised one, in which ‘manly’ states strive for self-reliance and security.

## **Part 2: Gender and Security Discourse**

Feminists in IR problematise the Realist approach to security on several grounds.

Most obviously, they question why military threats from other states (or, more

---

43. *Ibid.* p.17.

44. Carol Cohn, “Emasculating America’s Linguistic Deterrent”, in Adrienne Harris and Ynestra King (eds) *Rocking the Ship of State: Toward A Feminist Peace Politics*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), p.160.

45. *Ibid.* p.161

recently, from terrorist groups) are considered more important and immediate than the threat to human life posed by poverty, HIV/AIDS, environmental destruction or domestic abuse, all of which are claimed to disproportionately affect women. As a corollary, they challenge the Realist reliance on destructive military technology, insisting that welfare budgets do more to provide genuine security for women than increased defence spending.<sup>46</sup> Feminists also seek to undermine the view that security is something which can be possessed or guaranteed by the state. Instead, they have urged us to understand security as a process, immanent in our relationships with others, and always partial, elusive and contested. Conceived in this way, it must involve subjects—including women—in the provision of their own security.<sup>47</sup>

Two gendered aspects of Realist conceptions of security are particularly important for our purposes. First, Realists correlate security with invulnerability, invincibility and impregnability. This is strongly evident in the White Paper. It is claimed, for example, that:

The rationale for continuous deterrent patrolling (which the UK has maintained since 1969)... is that the submarine on patrol is invulnerable to an attack. For example, we are confident that our SSBNs [Ballistic Missile

---

46. See, for example, Charlotte Bunch, "A Feminist Human Rights Lens on Human Security". Centre for Women's Global Leadership (2003), online at:

<http://www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/globalcenter/charlotte/humansecurity.pdf> (last accessed 05/06/2008); V. Spike Peterson, V. "Security and Sovereign States: What is at Stake in Taking Feminism Seriously?", in V. Spike Peterson (ed.) *Gendered States: Feminist (Re)visions of International Relations Theory* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992), pp.31-64; Jan Jindy Pettman, *Worlding Women: A Feminist International Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1996); J. Ann Tickner, *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); J. Ann Tickner, *Gendering World Politics: Issues and Approaches in the Post Cold War Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); United Nations, Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW). 2000. *Fact Sheet 1: the Feminization of Poverty*, available at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/session/presskit/fs1.htm> (last accessed 04/06/2008)

47. Christine Sylvester, *Feminist Theory and International Relations in a Postmodern Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Iris Marion Young, "Feminist Reactions to the Contemporary Security Regime", *Hypatia* 18:1 (2003), pp. 223-231.

Submarines] on deterrent patrol have remained completely undetected by a hostile or potentially hostile state. This means we have an assured nuclear deterrent available at all times.<sup>48</sup>

As Susannah Radstone has argued, however, invulnerability is an unachievable fantasy with obviously gendered connotations. It is the female body that is penetrated and impregnated while the male body remains, or ought to remain, intact and impermeable.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, as argued above, nuclear technologies do not operate in a social vacuum. They are created and operated by humans and, as such, there can be no guarantees of infallibility. Indeed, the world may be decidedly less secure when submarines armed with nuclear missiles are continuously on patrol, but the emphasis in the White Paper on protection through superior technology makes this possibility unthinkable.

Second, and perhaps more important, Realist views of security cast the state and its military wing as 'protector' and civilians within the state as 'protected', a dichotomy which is profoundly gendered. Judith Hicks Stiehm, for instance, highlights the historical association of the protector role with men and the protected role with women; further, she claims that the protector role gains meaning and status precisely

---

48 Cm 6994. 2006. *The Future of the UK's Nuclear Deterrent*. Presented to Parliament by The Secretary of State for Defence and the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, By Command of Her Majesty. London: The Stationary Office. Online at [http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AC00DD79-76D6-4FE3-91A1-6A56B03C092F/0/DefenceWhitePaper2006\\_Cm6994.pdf](http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AC00DD79-76D6-4FE3-91A1-6A56B03C092F/0/DefenceWhitePaper2006_Cm6994.pdf) (last accessed 04/06/2008), p.27, see also pp.7, 22, 26.

49. Susannah Radstone, "The War of the Fathers: Trauma, Fantasy, and September 11", *Signs: Journal of Women in Politics and Culture* 28:1 (2002), pp.457-459.

through its privileging over those who are feminised as vulnerable.<sup>50</sup> As Iris Marion Young put it more recently:

The role of the masculine protector puts those protected, paradigmatically women and children, in a subordinate position of dependence and obedience. To the extent that citizens of a democratic state allow their leaders to adopt a stance of protectors toward them, these citizens come to occupy a subordinate status like that of women in the patriarchal household. We are to accept a more authoritarian and paternalistic state power, which gets its support partly from the unity a threat produces and our gratitude for protection.<sup>51</sup>

Although recent years have seen the increasing integration of women into the armed forces in many developed states, the resistance to this process and the anomalies to which it gives rise demonstrates for many feminists that this gendering of roles around protection still runs deep.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, the gendered protector/protected dichotomy still works in symbolic terms. Thus discourses of state protection remain saturated with constructions of ‘masculine autonomy (freedom, control, heroics) and feminine dependency (passivity, vulnerability, woman as adored but also despised)’.<sup>53</sup>

---

50. Judith Hicks Stiehm, “The Protected, The Protector, The Defender”, *Women's Studies International Forum* 5:3/4 (1982), pp. 367-376.

51. Iris Marion Young, “Feminist Reactions to the Contemporary Security Regime”, *Hypatia* 18:1 (2003), p.2.

52. e.g. Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California, 1989).

53. V. Spike Peterson, “Security and Sovereign States: What is at Stake in Taking Feminism Seriously?” in V. Spike Peterson (ed.) *Gendered States: Feminist (Re)visions of International Relations Theory*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992), p.54.

Moreover, feminists and others have pointed out that security discourse involves an enforced linkage between the protector and protected in the face of an *external threat*. For Stiehm this functions to mask the fact that the biggest danger to the protected may actually not come from outside the state but from the hyper-masculinised protectors themselves.<sup>54</sup> More recent poststructuralist-influenced work has made this relationship between the state and an external threat in Realist thought, or between state identity and ‘the Other’, central to their analyses. Although ‘the Other’ may seem radically different from ‘us’, for poststructuralists, it is our understanding of the Other which in part constitutes the self.<sup>55</sup> As feminists then point out, the self-other dichotomy frequently has gendered, as well as sexualised and racialised, dimensions. That the Other is frequently feminised, serving to underpin a masculine or hyper-masculine response, can be seen in examples ranging from colonial conceptions of virgin territories populated by compliant, exotic populations, to the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib.<sup>56</sup> Alternatively, ‘the Other’ may be portrayed as having a deficient, gross masculinity in contrast to the rationality and restraint of ‘ourselves’.<sup>57</sup> Thus different kinds of masculinities may be mobilised in security discourses, serving to differentiate a particular state government in the eyes of its population from its enemies and to legitimate its protector role.

---

54. Judith Hicks Stiehm “The Protected, The Protector, The Defender,” *Women's Studies International Forum* 5: 3/4 (1982), pp. 373-4; J. Ann Tickner, “You Just Don't Understand: Troubled Engagements between Feminists and IR Theorists,” *International Studies Quarterly* 41:4 (1997), p. 627.

55. Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

56. Cynthia Enloe, *Manoeuvres: The International Politics of Militarising Women's Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Joshua Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.356; Timothy Kaufman-Osborn, “Gender Trouble at Abu Ghraib?,” *Politics and Gender* 1:4 (2005), pp. 597-619.

57. Marysia Zalewski and Cynthia Enloe. “Questions about Identity in International Relations,” in Ken Booth and Steve Smith (eds) *International Relations Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), pp. 291-293.

The identity of the UK state as Protector comes through strongly in the White Paper. Blair's foreword opens with the statement that 'The primary responsibility of any government is to ensure the safety and security of its citizens'<sup>58</sup> and this is echoed throughout the document with numerous references to responsibility and specifically 'responsibilities to protect the current and future citizens of the UK'.<sup>59</sup> As well as establishing a gendered binary between the masculine, strong protector and the feminized, vulnerable population, this serves to delegitimise any opposition to nuclear weapons. Disarmament strategies become irresponsible and 'imprudent',<sup>60</sup> lacking in crucial masculine-associated traits. It is in this way that challenges to the nuclear-protector role are positioned as emasculating, rendering the British state not only incapable of protecting its citizens but at risk of losing its independence and leadership status.

In terms of an implied contrast to an external, threatening 'Other', the White Paper relies heavily on axioms about nuclear weapons 'deterring blackmail and acts of aggression' from opponents,<sup>61</sup> thus constructing a deceitful and coercive enemy which wields its nuclear weapons in a fundamentally different and less responsible way than the UK. There is considerable uncertainty and ambiguity, however, about who the enemy Other actually is. Indeed, no specific aggressor *can* be named, as the White Paper acknowledges: 'Currently no state has both intent to threaten our vital interests and the capability to do so with nuclear weapons'.<sup>62</sup>

---

58. Cm 6994. 2006. *The Future of the UK's Nuclear Deterrent*. Presented to Parliament by The Secretary of State for Defence and the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, By Command of Her Majesty. London: The Stationary Office. Online at [http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AC00DD79-76D6-4FE3-91A1-6A56B03C092F/0/DefenceWhitePaper2006\\_Cm6994.pdf](http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AC00DD79-76D6-4FE3-91A1-6A56B03C092F/0/DefenceWhitePaper2006_Cm6994.pdf) (last accessed 04/06/2008), p.5.

59. *Ibid.* p.8.

60. *Ibid.* p. 20.

61. *Ibid.* p. 7.

62. *Ibid.* p.19.

Given this rather glaring absence, the White Paper falls back on a strongly Realist emphasis on the dangers posed by the uncertainty of an anarchical international system, in which no one can ever be fully trusted. The section on ‘the policy context’ for the Trident decision is particularly interesting here. We are told that ‘proliferation risks remain’,<sup>63</sup> that the number of states with nuclear weapons continues to increase, and that existing nuclear arsenals are being modernised. The White Paper then refers readers to a box on the next page for ‘more details’, yet here we find no evidence of specific threats but rather information on all nuclear weapons states: those recognised by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (the US, Russia, France and China) and ‘other states’ (India, Pakistan, North Korea and Israel). This is reinforced in a subsequent discussion entitled ‘re-emergence of a major nuclear threat’ which hints at the possibility of NATO allies in the future ‘put[ting] us under threat’.<sup>64</sup> There is no consideration of how likely (or not) this possibility may be. In short, the White Paper is forced to rely on decontextualised and rather tenuous generalisations about *all* states as potential enemy Others in order to justify Trident renewal—regardless of their intent or capability, or our relationship to them.

Further, the White Paper fastens on one particular type of state as particularly threatening, that is ‘weak and failing states’ which ‘offer safe havens for international terrorists and potentially create wider instability’.<sup>65</sup> We suggest that the word ‘terrorist’ performs an important function here, one reinforced by a discussion later in the same section of ‘state-sponsored terrorism’ and of the hope that the British nuclear deterrent might influence the decision-making process of any state considering

---

63. *Ibid.* p.14.

64. *Ibid.* p.19.

65. *Ibid.* p.18.

transferring nuclear technology to terrorists. The reader is reminded that this policy of nuclear rearmament is being considered in the context of the so-called ‘War on Terror’, frequently (and problematically) conceived in Manichean terms of a global struggle between good and evil, the civilised and barbaric. Such a binary framework is explicitly constructed in Tony Blair’s foreword: ‘We must assume that the global struggle in which we are engaged today between moderation and extremism will continue for a generation or more’.<sup>66</sup> It seems to us that this War on Terror discourse serves not only to reinforce the Realist worldview that all states are potential enemy Others, but also to expand the sense of fear and threat still further to include non-state actors. Indeed, the enemy may be within our own state. Although this contributes to the general climate of fear that can be used to help justify the renewal of Trident, it also leads to yet another tension in the White Paper because, as the Government acknowledges, ‘our nuclear deterrent is not designed to deter non-state actors’.<sup>67</sup> Nuclear weapons are indiscriminate in their effects and cannot be used to pick off terrorists from the civilian populations in which they embed themselves. Further, the Faustian pact of nuclear deterrence logic only works with other nuclear states. Thus ‘weak and failing’ states have to do an awful lot of work in the White Paper, as a kind of vector of ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’ against which the British state can legitimise itself and must protect its population. Yet simultaneously the ‘weakness’ of the states concerned is emphasised. In sum, in the absence of an obvious threatening enemy Other, the White Paper is forced to rely on vague axioms and problematic and contradictory Other constructions to justify its Protector role and the renewal of Trident.

---

66. *Ibid.* p.5.

67. *Ibid.* p.19.

A final point of interest about the Protector identity that is so prominent in the White Paper is that it appears to be adopted reluctantly rather than with relish. This reluctance is implied in phrases such as ‘We would not want to have available the terrifying power of these weapons unless we believed that to be necessary to deter a future aggressor’,<sup>68</sup> and it is reinforced by the emphasis placed on efforts that the UK has made to reduce its nuclear stockpile. It could even be said that the picture of Blair in the foreword captures some of this reluctance. He is suited, serious, authoritative, but grimacing slightly and not looking directly at the viewer. The impression is of a man taking on a burden. This is no doubt in part because he knew many of his political colleagues were going to be deeply opposed to Trident renewal (indeed, Blair himself was once a member of the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament). This ‘Reluctant Protector’ knows he has to tone down the more bravura aspects of masculinised security discourse if he is to convince his readership of the need to renew nuclear weapons in this post-Cold War era. Nonetheless, the weighty task of renewing nuclear deterrence is one that he, as ‘Responsible Steward’, remains prepared to take on.<sup>69</sup>

### **Part 3: Gender and the State in International Relations**

The previous section discussed the masculine character of the identity of the ‘Protector’; in the next, we go on to address the masculine identity of the state more generally. In the dominant Realist view, upheld by both mainstream academics and

---

68. *Ibid.* p.5.

69. It should be pointed out that Tony Blair’s successor as Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, has been indistinguishable from his predecessor in terms of his support for Trident renewal. See BBC, 2006, “Brown Backs Trident Replacement,” online at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/5103764.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5103764.stm) (last accessed 05/06/2008), and Paul Rogers, “Gordon Brown’s White Elephants,” *Open Democracy* (2007), online at [http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflicts/global\\_security/white\\_elephants](http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflicts/global_security/white_elephants) (last accessed 05/06/2008).

the majority of policy maker states are ‘unitary actors whose internal characteristics, beyond an assessment of their relative capabilities, are not seen as necessary for understanding their vulnerabilities or security-enhancing behaviour’.<sup>70</sup> This assumption that states act as coherent units draws its strength from their treatment as ‘notional persons’ in early modern jurisprudence.<sup>71</sup> Relatedly, the state is understood to be independent, signified by the status of sovereignty, which entails a claim not only to authority within a territory but to independence from, and legal equality to, other such authorities. Realists do not distinguish between the legal status of sovereignty and actual state practice; they assume that states are as independent from one another as they claim to be. Moreover, like a person, the state must be able to act—and act in particular ways. The fact of international anarchy (or lack of overarching government) is interpreted by realists as bringing with it a ‘self-help’ system in which states cannot rely on others and must seek to defend themselves or perish. Finally, as Alan James makes clear, the state for Realists is a fundamentally *rational* actor:

The state is said to behave rationally because it is pictured as bending its efforts in a consistent and calculated way towards a clearly-established goal. And it can be so depicted because it is a single unit. The analogy is with the sober and mature man who gives careful thought to the achievement of his purposes.<sup>72</sup>

---

70. J. Ann Tickner, “You Just Don’t Understand: Troubled Engagements between Feminists and IR Theorists,” *International Studies Quarterly* 41:4 (1997), p. 624.

71. Alan James, “The Realism of Realism: The State and the Study of International Relations,” *Review of International Studies* 15:3 (1989), p. 220.

72. *Ibid*, p.218.

As this quote indicates, the Realist state is a ‘manly state’.<sup>73</sup> We can see here the systematic mobilising of gendered dichotomies such as active/passive, independent/(inter)dependent, and rational/irrational, and the assumption that the state fits with the masculine side of the dichotomies. Needless to say, the model of rationality James describes has been critiqued by countless feminist philosophers. Proponents of this model are accused of neglecting social context, both in terms of the domestic labour and relationships that make the processes of rational decision making possible, and in terms of the consequences of the rational decisions made. As Jacqui True points out, ‘[r]ational thinkers such as men and states do not figure in their cost-benefit analyses of foreign policies (military build-up, war mobilisation, economic liberalisation or protection), the social costs that are borne by ‘private’ family-households and communities’.<sup>74</sup> In addition, proponents of this model of rationality are criticised for evacuating emotional and ethical dimensions of thought, historically gendered feminine, as highlighted in our discussion above about the limitations of technostrategic discourse.

If Realism’s epistemology (its underlying conception of knowledge) is gendered, its ontology (its underlying conception about the self and agency) is equally so. Feminists would argue that James’s analogy comparing the state to a man is not accidental but intrinsic to how the state is understood: this is ‘an exclusionary masculine model of agency derived from a context of unequal gender relations, where primarily women’s child rearing and care-giving work supports the development of

---

73 Charlotte Hooper, *Manly States: Masculinities, International Relations, and Gender Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

74. See pp. 249, 255-6 in Jacqui True, “Feminism”, in Scott Burchill, Richard Devetak, Andrew Linklater, Matthew Paterson, Christian Reus-Smit and Jacqui True (eds) *Theories of International Relations*, 2nd edition (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2001).

autonomous male selves'.<sup>75</sup> In order to appear unitary, active and independent, then, these selves must mask their internal fractures, the constraints and tendencies to inertia that they might face, and their relations of (inter)dependency on internal and external others. Indeed, as Spike Peterson points out (in a demonstration of the close linkage here with gendered protection discourses),

Dependency is demeaning, a status indicative of subordination and one shunned by the free man ... being protected is an identity to be avoided as much as possible. This version of protection constructs dependency in narrow, dichotomous terms that obscure (inter)dependent relations as a pervasive feature of social reality.<sup>76</sup>

These dimensions of state identity can all be found in the White Paper. For example, the unitary, coherent character of the UK is constantly emphasised through the use of several rhetorical techniques. Several of these can be seen in the following sentences from section 1:

1.1: The United Kingdom is committed to helping to secure international peace and security. Since 1956, the UK's nuclear deterrent has underpinned our ability to do so, even in the most challenging circumstances ... we have employed our nuclear forces strictly as a means to deter acts of aggression against our vital interests ...

---

75. *Ibid.* p. 249.

76. See p. 54 in V. Spike Peterson, "Security and Sovereign States: What is at Stake in Taking Feminism Seriously?" in V. Spike Peterson (ed.) *Gendered States: Feminist (Re)visions of International Relations Theory* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992).

1.2 Our manifesto at the 2005 General Election made a commitment to retain the UK's existing nuclear deterrent.<sup>77</sup>

What can be seen here is, first, the use of the collective pronoun 'we' and its possessive form 'our' to equate both with the UK state and the current Government, often in close proximity. This is done throughout the text, and it serves to legitimise the current regime by masking internal debates, fusing this Government with past ones and Government with State. Second, the 'vital interests' and actions of the state and the people within it are also fused, masking any disjuncture between citizens and their government. Third, the unified, coherent and even *strong* nature of the UK state is established through an implicit contrast with the 'weak and failing states' emphasised above as a key enemy Other in the White Paper. While there are a couple of slippages in this construction, with two passing references to past Governments and an occasional acknowledgement of internal opposition to the Government's plans on Trident, the overriding impression is of a state that thinks and acts as one.

The way in which this thinking and acting are presented are key to the masculine character of the construction. Specifically, the capacity of the British state for rational decision making and then to act decisively and unhindered is constantly emphasised. As the executive summary states: 'We have thus decided to take the steps necessary to sustain a credible deterrent capability in the 2020s and beyond'.<sup>78</sup> To take the rationality part of this construction first, this is constantly drawn out through an

---

77. See p. 9 of Cm 6994. 2006. *The Future of the UK's Nuclear Deterrent*. Presented to Parliament by The Secretary of State for Defence and the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, By Command of Her Majesty. London: The Stationary Office. Online at [http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AC00DD79-76D6-4FE3-91A1-6A56B03C092F/0/DefenceWhitePaper2006\\_Cm6994.pdf](http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AC00DD79-76D6-4FE3-91A1-6A56B03C092F/0/DefenceWhitePaper2006_Cm6994.pdf) (last accessed 04/06/2008).

78. *Ibid.* p.7.

explicit (if highly selective and edited) discussion of the decision making process, particularly in Annex B. It is clear that reasoning is conceived as the correlation of means and ends, thus ‘a thorough review of the widest possible range of options’ was undertaken<sup>79</sup> in order to see how the goal of maintenance of the nuclear deterrence could be achieved. ‘Our manifesto at the 2005 General Election made a commitment to retain the UK’s existing nuclear deterrent ... We have now reached the point at which procurement decisions are necessary’.<sup>80</sup> The rationality at work here is decontextualised and strategic, focused only on how best to uphold a pre-set objective (there is no discussion, for example, of the possibility of disarmament as an alternative goal). Further, this mode of reasoning involves undertaking a cost-benefit analysis when assessing the best means to obtain that objective. Concretely, this means that the relative power and vulnerability of various nuclear systems are compared, along with their price.<sup>81</sup> There is, as already mentioned above, no attention to the human cost of using the bomb, nor to the moral and emotional problems involved in threatening to use it.

For deterrence logic to work, the British state has to attribute similar means-end, cost-benefit analysis to other states, including ‘weak states’. These are assumed liable to think again when confronted by the certain expectation that ‘any attack on our vital interests ... would lead to a proportionate response’.<sup>82</sup> No ‘mad dictators’ or ‘rogue states’ here, then, for the introduction of emotional factors in state reasoning might threaten to unravel the masculine state identity construct on which the White Paper depends. But if all states are fundamentally rational on this view, there does seem to

---

79. *Ibid.* p.34.

80. *Ibid.* p.9.

81. *Ibid.* e.g. p.39.

82. *Ibid.* p.19.

be something distinctive about the way in which the reasoning process of the British state is presented, something which marks it as superior to its potential enemy Others. We would suggest that has to do with its ‘reasonable’ or ‘moderate’ character. As discussed above, Blair’s foreword reminds us of the War on Terror framework with its Manichean struggle between ‘moderation and extremism’. Thus the terrorist-sponsoring weak states may be rational in their decision-making processes but the goals to which they may aspire are positioned as extreme. In contrast, the goals of the moderate British state are not only reasonable (the security of British citizens) but represent high minded moral purpose, befitting its ethical leadership role: witness the repeated linkage of the UK’s goals to ‘international peace and security’.<sup>83</sup>

Further, the text states repeatedly that the UK has been reasonable or moderate in its pursuit of security: thus its nuclear arsenal has ‘been used only to deter acts of aggression against our vital interests, never to coerce others’.<sup>84</sup> Again, the implied contrast is with extremist enemy Others, capable of ‘blackmail and acts of aggression’.<sup>85</sup> It is asserted that the UK ‘would only consider using nuclear weapons in self defence ... And even then only in extreme circumstances’<sup>86</sup>—i.e., if it was forced from the norm of moderation. If the abandonment of second strike doctrine, discussed above, should give readers pause for thought about the authenticity of this construction of the UK as moderate, the construct is reinforced by the association throughout the text of the process of British decision-making with phrases redolent of its reasonable character, such as ‘considered carefully’,<sup>87</sup> ‘we must therefore be

---

83. *Ibid.* p. 9.

84 *Ibid.* p.6.

85 *Ibid.*, p.7.

86. *Ibid.* .

87. *Ibid.* p.10.

realistic about our ability precisely to predict’,<sup>88</sup> and ‘thorough review’.<sup>89</sup> In fact, these phrases, along with the foregrounding of the ways in which the UK has met its international legal obligations in section 2 and Annex A, gives the text as a whole a legalistic ring. In sum, this is the masculine rationality of the prudent, scholarly lawyer rather than the aggressive, coercive masculinity of the pugilist or ‘extremist’.

Nonetheless, the British state is, and must be, capable of decisive action. Such capability is central to Realist understandings of the state and shot through with masculine associations in contrast to feminised passivity and succumbing to constraint. Thus active verb constructions and descriptions of decisive action predominate throughout the text. The foreword and executive summary, for example, mention repeatedly that ‘we believe’ and ‘we have decided’.<sup>90</sup> Even when the state is doing nothing, or reducing its stockpile, it is actively choosing to do so: ‘we decided not to take an option ... We will reduce ... we have not conducted ... we have increased our transparency ... we have ceased production .... We continue to make progress’.<sup>91</sup> There is also an overt emphasis on avoiding inaction or constraint. ‘[O]ur capacity to act’ must ‘not be constrained by nuclear blackmail by others’,<sup>92</sup> ‘we must not allow such states to ... deter us and the international community from taking the action required ... or fundamentally constrain our policy options’.<sup>93</sup> The possibility of a ‘dormant’ nuclear weapons capability cannot be entertained, the capability must be ‘active’ and also ‘credible’.<sup>94</sup> The need for British nuclear weapons capacity to be

---

88. *Ibid.* p.16.

89. *Ibid.* p.34.

90. *Ibid.* pp. 5-7.

91. *Ibid.* pp.12-13.

92. *Ibid.* p.5.

93. *Ibid.* p.19.

94. *Ibid.* p.21.

‘credible’ is emphasised at several points so even if we do not act, it must be possible that we can, and others must believe that we can.

Finally, there is a strong emphasis on the fact that the state must be able to ‘go it alone’. ‘*An independent centre of nuclear decision-making enhances the overall deterrent effect of allied nuclear forces*’<sup>95</sup> and, again, ‘The UK’s nuclear forces must remain fully operationally independent if they are to be a credible deterrent’.<sup>96</sup> Yet it seems to us there are two key tensions in the rhetoric around independence. In the first place, and in a move linked to the ethical leadership discourse and intended to placate its internal opponents, the government is also keen to insist on its ‘multilateral’ relationships and its participation in NATO. Significantly, the White Paper asserts that it is not only the demands of self-defence that could give rise to the use of nuclear weapons but also the need to defend NATO allies.<sup>97</sup> Thus, ‘the UK’s nuclear deterrent supports collective security ... separately controlled but mutually supporting nuclear forces therefore create an enhanced overall deterrent effect’.<sup>98</sup>

In the second place, there is the extremely close relationship with the US. The White Paper asserts that the British nuclear submarines will be:

fully operationally independent of the US ... decision making and use of the system remains entirely sovereign to the UK ... the US has

---

95. *Ibid.* p. 18, emphasis in original

96. *Ibid.* p. 22.

97. *Ibid.* p. 14.

98. *Ibid.* p. 18.

never sought to exploit our procurement relationship in this area as a means to influence foreign policy.<sup>99</sup>

Nonetheless, this procurement relationship remains a very close-knit one. Although the new submarines are to be built in the UK,<sup>100</sup> we are not told explicitly from where future missiles and warheads are to be obtained. The White Paper is silent on the long-term lease arrangements for missiles from the US.<sup>101</sup> It does insist on the need to ‘participate in the US life extension programme for the Trident D5 missile’, because otherwise ‘it will not be possible to retain our existing Trident D5 missiles in service much beyond 2020’.<sup>102</sup> Hence the need to seek ‘assurances’ from the US government that the British government would be allowed to opt in to any plan to develop a successor to these missiles.<sup>103</sup> Of course, the US government does not need to seek similar assurances; this is not the mutual support of multilateralism so much as the dependence of the UK upon the US in a subordinated and thus feminised role. These glimpses of co-dependence and dependence seriously undercut claims about independence, which may explain why such claims are repeated so frequently throughout the text. Complete independence is key to the construction of the unitary, rational, masculine state that underpins British nuclear policy, but, as so often in life, it is an illusion.

---

99 *Ibid.* p. 23.

100. *Ibid.* p. 29.

101. Robin Cook (2006), “Worse than Irrelevant: Replacing Trident is Against both our National Interests and our International Obligations”. Online at <http://www.acronym.org.uk/dd/dd80/80doc03.htm> (last accessed 05/06/2008).

102. See pp. 7 and 11 in Cm 6994. 2006. *The Future of the UK's Nuclear Deterrent*. Presented to Parliament by The Secretary of State for Defence and the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, By Command of Her Majesty. London: The Stationary Office. Online at [http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AC00DD79-76D6-4FE3-91A1-6A56B03C092F/0/DefenceWhitePaper2006\\_Cm6994.pdf](http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/AC00DD79-76D6-4FE3-91A1-6A56B03C092F/0/DefenceWhitePaper2006_Cm6994.pdf) (last accessed 04/06/2008)

103. *Ibid.* p.31.

## Conclusion

Drawing on feminist critiques of discourses about nuclear weapons, security and the state, this paper has made three sets of claims about the way in which gender operates in the recent Government White Paper on Trident. Firstly, it seems to us that the White Paper draws less than expected on masculine-saturated codes when describing nuclear technology, but it does evacuate and devalue that which is associated with the feminine: emotional responses and the bodies that are affected by nuclear weapons. It also clings to the masculinised status that nuclear possession brings with it, albeit juggling this with more ethically based claims to leadership. Secondly, the White Paper is explicitly based on an understanding of security which argues for invulnerability achieved through technology rather than through relationships, and which privileges the masculine protector over the feminised protected—although it remains unclear who we are being protected from and there is some apparent reluctance in taking on the protector role. Thirdly, the White Paper is underpinned by a ‘Realist’ understanding of the state-as-actor which has a strongly masculine character in its emphasis on a narrow rationality and on independent action. There seems to us to be a significant tension here, given the relations of interdependence and dependence also glimpsed in the text. We also suggest there is an implied contrast in the text between the moderate masculinity of the British state and the more aggressive or extreme masculinity of enemy Others.

Taken as whole, it seems to us that the White Paper constructs a distinctive, masculinised identity for the British nuclear state as a ‘responsible steward’.<sup>104</sup> This is

---

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9.

a form of masculinity that remains rational, decisive and active but deliberately eschews the more obviously aggressive and phallic connotations of its weaponry; that is concerned to provide ethical leadership in the international system; that takes on the familiar masculine protector role, but with a degree of reluctance; and that is moderate and restrained in its choices and actions. We have here an interesting contrast with the more gung-ho forms of nuclear masculinity suggested in feminist analyses of the Cold War arms race. Indeed, it seems likely that there has been a significant shift in the identity of the British nuclear state, from a Cold War male warrior to a kind of post-Cold War ‘new man’. Perhaps the ‘responsible steward’ is one of a range of ways that dominant or ‘hegemonic’ forms of masculinity have been adapted for the post-Cold War world order.<sup>105</sup> Perhaps also there are factors here specific to the Labour Government and its changing personnel. Clearly, the possibility that there has been an epochal change in the masculine identity of the British nuclear state, and the reasons why, require further research and cannot be established definitively in this paper.

Instead, we want to close with two points. Firstly, although hegemonic masculine forms may shift over time and place, such shifts are not necessarily progressive. Indeed, Charlotte Hooper suggests that the apparent softening of hegemonic masculinity characteristic of Western states in the era of globalisation is not a sign of the imminent demise of male power but rather part and parcel of the adjustment process necessary to maintain power and status.<sup>106</sup> More precisely, she argues that changes in ‘masculinist practices’ work to ensure both that hegemonic masculinity remains hegemonic and that it continues to meet the requirements of its elite

---

105. R.W. Connell, ‘The State, Gender, and Sexual Politics’, *Theory and Society* 19:4 (1990), pp. 507-544, and Charlotte Hooper, *Manly States: Masculinities, International Relations, and Gender Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

106. Charlotte Hooper, *Manly States: Masculinities, International Relations, and Gender Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) p. 67.

masculine-identified members (usually white, middle or upper class, heterosexual men).<sup>107</sup> If this is indeed how hegemonic masculinity operates, what we are perhaps observing in the White Paper is a shift in the self-image of the British state, but one that enables it to avoid relinquishing the masculine ideal of power and status as measured in nuclear weapons. The construction of the ‘responsible steward’ identity is thus a smokescreen, diverting attention from the lack of substantive change in policy. Having said this, shifts in the masculine identity of the British state remain significant because any disruptions to traditional definitions of masculinity demonstrate the arbitrariness of gendered dichotomies and open up potential for change.<sup>108</sup>

This leads us onto our second point, that the construction of the ‘responsible steward’ identity remains far from complete. Indeed, as we indicated at several points above, there are several instabilities and tensions in the way in which masculine codes and images are mobilised in the White Paper. Most notably, it appears that the British nuclear state remains attracted to the status and privilege which it believes goes with possession of nuclear weapons, yet it also wants to develop a leadership role based on ethics rather than fear. Further, the role of the British nuclear state as protector of its citizens proves rather difficult to establish in the absence of an obvious enemy Other, and instead we find a problematic reliance on a fear of ‘weak states’ and a contestable characterisation of all states, even current allies, as potential deadly enemies. Finally, we see both an emphasis on the independence of the British nuclear deterrence and a recognition of the importance of interdependence and multilateralism—as well as an effort to avoid drawing attention to the dependent relationship on the United States in

---

107. *Ibid*, p. 75.

108 *Ibid*, p. 75.

nuclear procurement, which means full independence simply cannot be achieved. Such tensions in the British government's position are indicative, perhaps, that its masculine underpinnings are less stable than is often assumed. We note that both Hooper<sup>109</sup> and R. W. Connell<sup>110</sup> suggest that feminists can exploit the contradictions between 'softer' and 'harder' forms of masculinity, opening up space for alternative identity constructions. The tensions we have exposed in the White Paper should thus give those engaged in the continuing struggle against Trident renewal further fuel for their arguments. It seems to us that exposure and exacerbation of internal instabilities in the gendered discourse of nuclear weapons states remains an important feminist contribution to the struggle for a nuclear-free world.

---

109. *Ibid*, p.194.

110. R. W. Connell, "The State, Gender, and Sexual Politics," *Theory and Society* 19:4 (1990), pp. 507-44.