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Male Problem, Female Solution

“Considering their bias toward war, should males alone (or nearly alone) control a nation’s policies on national security and war?”

When we talk about war and global security, we usually refer to specific groups and nations. But those terms hide the actual instigators: As noted earlier, it is typically men who decide to wage war – aggressive men driven by inherited genes, testosterone, and deep-seated cultural attitudes; men who feel they must be seen as strong, resolute, victorious; men advised by similar men with similar attitudes; men whose predecessors have an almost unbroken history of waging war.

Considering their bias toward war, should males alone (or nearly alone) control a nation’s policies on national security and war? Or are there practical alternatives?

In *Exercise of Power*, Robert Gates calls for “The Symphony of Powers,” by which he means the U.S. should use a panoply of methods to exercise power, not just its military. A full spectrum would include economic measures, strategic communications, technology, diplomacy, foreign assistance, ideology, cultural outreach, and covert operations. Gates asserts:

Throughout history, power has most commonly been defined in terms of the ability to coerce obedience or submission by force of arms. But it is a mistake to think of power only in those terms ... I argued as secretary of defense that the American government had become too reliant on the use of military power to defend and extend our interest internationally, the use of force had become a first choice rather than a last resort.

“First choice, rather than a last resort.” The idea cries out for explication. War is horrific, costly in lives and treasure, and can damage the standing of leaders who order it. Why prefer it to other means of exercising power? The answer must come from a factor already discussed: Human males have a propensity for combat and war – not an instinct or compulsion, but a strong inclination to address disputes with violence. War has the appeal of seeming direct, decisive, fast. There’s no “pussy-footing around,” no waiting for non-military means to take effect. Leaders can appear, at least for a while, strong and dominant (Remember President Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” slogan?) This posture often wins approval from other men and the admiration of women. Another result is perpetual war.

Compounding the problem, some nations have a history of using false evidence to justify war. One example: According to an article published by the U.S. State Department's Office of the Historian, the U.S. government in the early nineteen-sixties opposed an election in South Vietnam that some male officials thought would unite the country under communist rule. This policy led to sending U.S. warships to the Gulf of Tonkin, off the coast of North Vietnam. On August 2, 1964, North Vietnamese patrol boats fired (ineffectually) on an American warship in the Gulf of Tonkin. The United States then claimed that a "second attack" occurred when North Vietnamese boats allegedly fired torpedoes at an American destroyer on August 4, 1964. President Johnson immediately asked Congress for war powers and escalated operations against North Vietnam.

That decision could be seen as timely, decisive action against a dangerous enemy. But an article on history.net by a retired U.S. Navy captain states that the alleged second attack never happened: Navy Commander James Stockdale (later Ross Perot's running mate) was flying over the area when the alleged attacks were supposed to have occurred. He said, "Our destroyers were just shooting at phantom targets ... There were no [North Vietnamese] boats there." The captain of one of the U.S. destroyers attributed the initial reports from his crew to "over-eager sonar operators." This view of the incident was later supported by the former Defense Secretary, Robert McNamara, the National Security Agency, and the Pentagon Papers.

The United States may have had other reasons to regard North Vietnam as an enemy, but if the federal administration had taken more time to analyze and debate the total situation, it may have thought better of launching a war that eventually cost more than 58,000 American lives and a million other lives, not to mention \$1 trillion in today's dollars, according to thebalance.com. Instead of thorough investigation and appraisal, we had the age-old male reaction: A man with authority must not appear hesitant. He must not appear timid. He must, at any cost, "act like a man." That command, impelled by biological inheritance and a male-dominated society, often results in radically different actions from those prompted by an effort to act like a responsible adult.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 was also predicated on false evidence. As reported by UN inspector Hans Blix before the invasion, there were no weapons of mass destruction – a conclusion reached after 700 inspections. In addition, it is well-established that there never were any "yellow cakes" from Niger and no "aluminum tubes" suitable for use in centrifuges. Apparently, these facts were either ignored, or not adequately investigated, before making the decision to invade. Yet men in the United States launched a war that has lasted more than 17 years, claimed roughly 300,000 lives, and cost trillions of dollars, according to watson.brown.edu.

Women better suited to avoid war

Would a female President have decided not to invade? Would a much larger group of female Congress members have asked more questions and debated the issues more

thoroughly? One way to answer such questions is to understand why women are better suited to avoid war than men. There are at least six reasons:

1. Males oriented to combat

As described earlier, human males obtained food by hunting and killing large animals with crude weapons for nearly 300,000 years. This activity required a hormonal balance favoring violent aggression, as well as physical abilities that enabled tracking, running, and lethal spearing. Given the high survival value of the necessary genes, it's likely they were conserved by natural selection: Generation after generation, the most successful food providers probably fathered more children than did less successful hunters, so their genes have lived on.

In *The Most Dangerous Animal*, author and philosopher David L. Smith points out one effect of the male inheritance by quoting Sigmund Freud: "Men are not gentle, friendly creatures wishing for love, who simply defend themselves if they are attacked, but that a powerful measure of desire for aggression has to be reckoned as part of their instinctual endowment."

2. Females oriented to peace

In contrast, ancestral human females probably spent much of their adult life pregnant, nursing, or otherwise taking care of children, so their main activities would have been nurturing and gathering edible plants and fruit. These abilities would have been genetically conserved, because women who were good at nurturing and gathering

probably had more children who survived to sexual maturity than those who were not.

As mentioned earlier, women had to be assertive to get a fair share of food and comfortable living space, but they could not do it physically; the men were bigger, stronger, and more violent. So women had to achieve their goals by debate and negotiation – useful abilities when strategizing how to avoid a war.

3. A peace-oriented female brain

Given the substantial difference in the ancestral lifestyle of men and women – and the probable effect of natural selection – it would be reasonable to expect the female brain to be different from the male brain. Yet for many years, it was thought that any differences were minor and unimportant. In a 2017 article in *Stanford Medicine*, Bruce Goldman reports that view has changed:

But over the past 15 years or so, there's been a sea change as new technologies have generated a growing pile of evidence that there are inherent differences in how men's and women's brains are wired and how they work.

Many studies support this finding as a key characteristic of men and women: A 2020 article on Columbia.edu states, “The parts [of the brain] that women used to perform their responsibilities increased in size while the parts that the men used for their activities (such as hunting) became larger compared to the female counterparts.” Also, a 2014 article by Uphadhayya and Guragain in the *Journal of Clinical & Diagnostic Research* states, “Male and female brains show anatomical, functional and biochemical

differences throughout life.” Women, for example, have a larger brain area devoted to verbal communication and interpreting non-verbal cues, abilities obviously useful in raising children – or conducting effective diplomacy.

4. A peace-oriented hormonal balance

The Stanford Medicine article mentioned above attributes brain differences to a difference in hormone balance:

But why are men’s and women’s brains different? One big reason is that, for much of their lifetimes, women and men have different fuel additives running through their tanks: the sex-steroid hormones ... Importantly, males developing normally in utero get hit with a big mid-gestation surge of testosterone, permanently shaping not only their body parts and proportions but also their brains.

In a 2018 issue of *Endocrine Reviews*, David Handelsman and colleagues quantify the difference in hormonal balance. The authors report that the far higher levels of testosterone in men, versus those in women, can have a significant effect on their potential for peak athletic performance:

From male puberty onward, the sex difference in athletic performance emerges as circulating testosterone concentrations rise as the testes produce 30 times more testosterone than before puberty, resulting in men having 15- to 20-fold greater circulating testosterone than children or women at any age.

This finding becomes even more significant when we remember that testosterone aggravates any tendency toward aggressive behavior that may already be present. With a far lower level of testosterone and other androgens, women are better equipped than men to have a dispassionate discussion about the prospect of going to war.

5. Peace-oriented type of aggression

There's no doubt that women can be just as aggressive as men. But women tend to have their own way of showing it, as reported by Kaj Bjorkqvist, a professor of developmental psychology at a Finnish university. In a psychology journal article published in 2018, he states:

Studies on gender differences in aggressive behavior are examined. In proportions of their total aggression scores, boys and girls are verbally about equally aggressive, while boys are more physically and girls more indirectly aggressive.

Lise Eliot, a Chicago Medical School professor, in a 2021 article in *Current Anthropology* reports a similar finding:

Of the various behavioral differences between males and females, physical aggression is one of the largest. Regardless of gender, children's physical aggressiveness peaks between two and four years of age but then starts diverging, as girls learn more quickly than boys to suppress such overt behaviors. By puberty there is a sizable gender difference in physical aggression and violence.

Studies like these tell us that women are far from the docile, submissive creatures some men would like them to be. At the same time, they tend to avoid expressing anger and aggression in physical terms, like those implicit in waging war.

6. Less violent criminal behavior

We have just reviewed some of the reasons to expect that women will behave differently from men in dealing with disputes. But does that difference carry through to the strong emotions implicit in violent criminal behavior? Data on violent crime indicate a positive answer. Based on a 2007 study by the U.S. Department of Justice, the HowStuffWorks website tells us men committed 75.6 percent of violent crimes, while women committed only 20.1 percent. (The gender of the remaining 4.3 percent could not be determined.)

A study by the National Center for Biotechnology Information provides additional evidence. After analyzing FBI data on U.S. homicides between 1976 and 1987, the Center reports, "Although women comprise more than half the U.S. population, they committed only 14.7% of the homicides noted during the study interval." Comparing the percentages, U.S. men in the study murdered nearly six times more often than women. Worldwide, according to 2013 report by the United Nations office on Drugs and Crime, 96% of all homicide perpetrators were men. So even when feeling the need to commit a criminal act, women are far less violent than men, a trait that would help to avoid needless military action.

The facts we've just reviewed show that women are substantially less violent than men and far more likely to debate and negotiate before resorting to military action. At the same time, history shows that women will go to war in certain situations. We are not talking about a day-and-night difference, but rather a difference that seems likely to lessen the chances of needless wars, such as the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Better results in negotiation

Women's tendency to debate and negotiate can have benefits beyond avoiding needless wars. Writing in *aeon.org*, science journalist Josie Glausiusz provides an example of women's superior negotiating skills in her report on findings of Mary Caprioli, a University of Minnesota professor:

Caprioli's data show that, as the number of women in parliament increases by 5 per cent, a state is five times less likely to use violence when confronted with an international crisis (perhaps because women are more likely to use a 'collective or consensual approach' to conflict resolution) ... an analysis by the US non-profit Inclusive Security of 182 signed peace agreements between 1989 and 2011 found that an agreement is 35 per cent more likely to last at least 15 years if women are included as negotiators, mediators and signatories.

This point brings us back to the national security policy of Robert Gates, as outlined earlier. He advises the U.S. (and other nations) to employ a broad array of methods before resorting to military action, which, he says, should

be a “last resort.” Based on the differences in how men and women tend to deal with disputes, women may be more inclined to follow Gates’s advice than men – and that is likely to make the world a more peaceful place.

Returning to our origins, it was women who had the job of keeping vulnerable infants and children alive in dangerous environments. In addition, each human mother had that job for at least a decade for each child, because human children develop slowly. It follows that women had a strong interest in keeping their local environment peaceful. Yelling and aggressive body postures in the home area may have been tolerable; physical harm was not. It’s no surprise, then, that natural selection favored females averse to violence. In contrast, men obtained food for their groups by frequent lethal violence.

Today, neither sex has a monopoly on constructive judgment. There may be times when a nation has to respond to attack with speed and military action. There are many other times when caution and non-violent methods are more productive. Japan in the nineteen-seventies, for example, found it could accomplish far more with cars and television sets than it could with bombs and bullets in the nineteen-forties. Economic and technological power can often be more useful than military power.

A call for balance

Men have been almost completely in charge of deciding to wage war for thousands of years, and the results have been catastrophic. It is time – past time – for women to have an equal voice in deciding when to resort to military action. Women have shown they can be effective military

officers in executing war policies; now it's time for women to play a key role in *creating* war policies.

Specifically, if there are 10 people sitting around a table deciding whether or not to go to war, at least five of them should be women.

There's another component. A woman's inclination to question and debate probably depends, to some extent, on the number of women in her organization. If only a small percentage of a governing body consists of women, those women (like other minorities) will likely feel peer pressure – pressure to act like men – as well as pressure from voters who believe that women with authority should somehow act like men. To get the full benefit that women can contribute to rational policy, a nation needs a high percentage of women at the federal level and many more in state legislatures and governorships nationwide. This is how we can change national attitudes about the appropriate role of women in national and state affairs. It may also be our best hope for more constructive defense, economic, environmental, and social policies.

Objections

At least two objections immediately arise: When women have been heads of state, some have not avoided war; Margaret Thatcher and Indira Gandhi come to mind. One answer to this objection is that women respond to situations. If a nation is attacked, it goes to war. It doesn't matter who is president or premier. Case in point: Israel's female premier presided over several wars. But Israel was fighting for its survival; it would have gone to war if the premier had been a goldfish, instead of Golda Meir.

Another objection is the reality is that many nations, especially those in the Mideast and some in the Far East, would never consider giving women a powerful voice in national affairs. We would then be faced with an asymmetrical situation: A potential adversary would be playing by different rules and might try to take advantage of a nation making a serious effort to avoid war. But history shows that when war is necessary, women leaders will indeed go to war. There is no evidence that female leaders, when pushed, will back down any more than men would in the same situation. That said, we have reviewed reasons to believe that women in power would help a country avoid, if not all wars, then some wars, which, for the United States and some other countries, would be a major change for the better.

The gender bias of aggression

Despite some progress, women are still hobbled by certain attitudes held by many men (and some women): One could be called the “Can’t Win Catch:” When a woman asserts herself, she is often cast as unfeminine or “bitchy.” If she acts deferentially, she is dismissed as a “lightweight” not fit for high office. To progress in any field, she often has to tip-toe between those two notions, a maneuver that men are free to avoid. It’s no surprise that these attitudes also come into play in politics. An October, 2020, *New York Times* article states:

Research has found that it is much harder for female candidates to be rated as ‘likable’ than men — and that they are disproportionately punished for traits voters accept in male politicians, including ambition and aggression. At the

same time, voters view their credentials more skeptically and question their toughness, a precarious situation that is so universal for women seeking leadership roles that it is known as the 'double bind.'

Another destructive attitude goes something like this: "It's good to be aggressive. You need aggression to make tough decisions and get things done. Men are naturally more aggressive than women. So if you want something done, give the job to a man. Of course, some women can be good managers, but mostly when they act like men."

Most people in the West don't say that anymore. But many think it, and the fallacy is still operative. It helps to explain, for example, why a female legislator might feel compelled to vote for a war she doesn't believe in: In a male-dominated setting, she has to show she can "act like a man." But is the general premise about the efficacy of aggression valid? Does sheer aggressiveness add validity to a decision? If men are naturally more aggressive than women, does that mean they're necessarily better at running companies – or countries? Let's consider some possibilities:

What if male aggression now operates all too often as an atavism, a counter-productive relic of our distant past?

What if fundamentalist religions demand strict adherence to doctrine and dogma, not to please God, but to bolster male authority?

What if, in fact, excessive male aggression is a primary source of needless wars and destructive practices in government, business, science, and other fields?

These possibilities may indicate it's time for women to assume a far more prominent position in government and societies throughout the world.

Women in the lead

The issue of whether women can lead has long been settled. In Western countries, for example, the most recent notable event may be the election of Kamala Harris as Vice-President of the United States. Several 2020 Presidential candidates were women, and a woman was America's popular-vote choice for President in 2016 by nearly three million votes. The U.S. had a woman (Janet Yellen) as the head of its Federal Reserve System, which has a major role in managing a \$20 trillion economy, and in 2021 Yellen became the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury. As of 2020, U.S. lawmakers included 25 female Senators and more than 100 female Congressional Representatives.

Elsewhere, women may play an even larger role in government. Germany, the most influential country in Europe, has been led by Angela Merkel (a former physicist) since 2005. A Council on Foreign Relations article shows that 21 countries had a female head of state in 2020.

Female leaders: better at managing Covid-19

An article by Amanda Taub in the April 24, 2020, *New York Times* reports that four countries with minimal death rates from Covid-19 (Finland, Germany, New Zealand, and Taiwan) – are all governed by women. Each took a risk-averse approach to dealing with the coronavirus by establishing strict programs of testing and social distancing soon after the virus appeared. In contrast, governments taking a bold approach – the United States and the United Kingdom –

were governed by notably aggressive males and had high death rates. Taub's article points out the potential merits of what some might call a female style of governing:

That style of leadership may become increasingly valuable. As the consequences of climate change escalate, there will likely be more crises arising out of extreme weather and other natural disasters. Hurricanes and forest fires cannot be intimidated into surrender any more than the virus can.

Turning to business, we find that only about 40 Fortune 500 companies have female CEOs – not nearly enough, but the companies include heavy-weights like General Motors, IBM, PepsiCo, Lockheed Martin, Oracle, General Dynamics, and Citigroup. (A few examples may no longer be current.) This group of female CEOs indicates that gender is no bar to leading huge organizations and that greater representation in this area awaits only society's recognition of female capability. In addition, women manage tens of thousands of smaller companies and other kinds of organizations throughout the U.S. The National Association of Women Business Owners states that in 2017 more than 11.6 million firms were owned by women, employed nearly 9 million people, and generated \$1.7 trillion in sales.

Women worldwide

It's not necessary to cite women as heads of state or as Fortune 500 CEOs to see their capabilities in many fields. A website from UN Women (beijing20.unwomen.org) gives the world inspirational biographical sketches of more than 40 women of achievement in at least 34 countries. The

breadth of their achievements is impressive by any standard: solo transatlantic sailor, solo skier to the South Pole, military and civilian pilots, holders of governing positions even in countries with daunting obstacles to women, professor of medicine, medical researcher, inventor of computer technology, mine-clearer, climber who has summited the seven highest peaks in the world, cliff-jumper and deep-sea scuba diver, military commander, and NASA scientist. One could argue this website should be required reading for children in elementary and secondary schools in many countries.

In October, 2020, came an event that points to an even larger role for women in science: French microbiologist Emmanuelle Charpentier and American biochemist Jennifer Doudna were awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for discovering the CRISPR/Cas 9 gene editing system, a low-cost way of editing genes to produce desirable genetic changes, one type of which may permit curing inherited diseases.

What the world needs is more of the same. More women achievers in diverse fields. More women in power. More women voting on fundamental issues. More women helping to make societies less violent, more equitable, more humane.

