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It is the beginning of the New Year and to date only one soldier has gone on trial for his role in the Iraqi prison abuse scandal. As I write this, Army Specialist, Charles Graner is on trial for his chief role in the torture of the prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Three fellow guards from the 372nd Military Police Company have already pleaded guilty to abusing prisoners. On January 17 and 18, Lynndie England will be court-martialed on charges stemming from the same prisoner abuse scandal. While Graner is described as the ringleader and faces 17 years in prison, England faces up to 38 years.

While we may not know or remember the names of the other soldiers involved in prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, we all know Lynndie England. When the pictures first came out, the world was shocked at the atrocities that were waged on the Iraqi prisoners. But even more shocking was the pictures of the "little girl" holding a leash, smiling over the degradation of Iraqi citizens. Those pictures have made her infamous.

While the world was shocked, the response from the left and from activists in particular has not been one of surprise. We have seen the photos, we have heard the reports, and as a group of people who are at the very least aware of the realities and atrocities committed by this country, we have responded with a lot of I-told-you-so's and many this-has-been-going-on-for-centuries. Funny enough in all of this discussion, there have been very few thoughtful probes into what the particular portrayal of Lynndie England means and why we know so much about her. While we are quick to point a finger at the soldiers for their deplorable racist acts, and the government for its role in yet another racist war to preserve capitalism, we have failed to recognize that the portrayal of Lynndie England and her role in all of this is significant.

For the rest of the world who is fed their information by the 6 o'clock news and is susceptible to sensationalism, the portrayal of Lynndie England may seem like a normal event. But to those of us who strive to understand patriarchal institutions and call ourselves feminists, the depiction of Lynndie England should have sent up red flags. But it didn't. Instead we lumped her in with the other abusers, and made her the poster child for the abuse. We failed to question the significance of the rising role of women in the military. We failed to question what war means for women. We failed to examine the role of patriarchal institutions and we failed to question why Lynndie England is significant.

I am not excusing the actions of anyone involved in the Iraqi prison abuse—from our enemies at the top to the executors of their actions at the bottom—any more than I excuse the people who abuse the 2 million prisoners in this country on a daily basis. However the way that Lynndie England has been portrayed as something "different" from all the other soldiers has seem to gone unnoticed and un-questioned by the left. After all the fact that she is a woman has been notable, and apparently quite newsworthy for the rest of the world. Why hasn't it been for us?

England is a white woman from a "trailer park." She will not only be persecuted for her "lowly" beginnings, but for being a woman who should not have engaged in such "unwomanly" behavior. She will be prosecuted both in the media and everywhere else for the rest of her life. But what is her crime? That she is a tormenter or a woman? I suppose England should be counting her blessings. Just think of what would have happened to her if she was a woman of color.

Lynndie England appears to be the only woman involved in the accusations of abuse. This fact alone has prompted the world to single her out. However, the fact of her being a woman is not the only thing that we know about her. In the first reports coming from Iraq, there were lists of the names of the soldiers involved: Sgt. so-and-so from wherever, Pvt. Whoever from whatever city. But when they got to her, they consistently described her as Lynndie England from a trailer park. I have just found it interesting how above all of the other soldiers, they have demonized her. Even Charles Graner, who is on trial at this very moment for being the ringleader of the atrocities of Abu Ghraib, remains a mystery. We don't know where he hails from. We don't know who his high school girlfriend was. We don't know what his parents do. But we know about Lynndie England. We know about her background, who she has been married to and for how long, how far along in her pregnancy she was, and now, that she has given birth to her child. We know where she has worked, what her class background is, what her parents do for a living, who her best friend is, and that the father of her child is Specialist Charles Graner. Lynndie England has become someone that we have come to know intimately. Her background information has been discussed around water coolers, pictures of her family are flashed at us on TV screens, interviews with old beaus and best friends have become topics for headline news. However, we know very little about the other people involved aside from their names ranks and serial numbers.

Her actions are not exempt from scrutiny; after all, she has been described by her family as a "strong-willed girl." Surely she knew the difference between right and wrong, certainly she knew that keeping a human being captive and performing acts of humiliation and abuse was a crime or at the very least, immoral…even in the military. But, why Lynndie England? Why do we know her above the others? Why has she consistently been depicted in political cartoons and not one of her fellow male abusers? Why does her trial make headline news while her ex-lover's does not? I find it chilling

that we live in a country that just got through portraying Jessica Lynch as the blond-haired, blue-eyed girl from the small town, the homecoming queen, the Virgin Mary, and without so much as a break from her TV movie and Playboy option we have found our succubus, our evil woman, our Mary Magdalene in Lynndie England, without even questioning why and what this means for those of us who are actively engaged in feminist politics.

There is a myth that men die in order to protect women and children, yet no one has stopped to point out that the institution of war has never been good for women even while we are told that we will reap the benefits of victory. No one has examined the fact that more and more propaganda is directed at women in support of our participation for war efforts even while women and our children are more likely to be displaced during a war. No one has questioned how and why women play supporting roles in the perpetuation of violence and the masculine warrior ideal while we simultaneously become the targets of rape and cruelty in war zones. No one scrutinized why we are pushed to play ever more active role in the military even while we and our sisters all over the world are more likely to be left in the aftermath to pick up the pieces and rebuild our communities with little or no resources. Women are often required to make more sacrifices for war efforts and we have failed to question why. But we have not failed to find out Lynndie England's sexual history.

There is such a mixture of shock, outrage, and confusion at the fact that a woman did this. People have come to her defense and claimed that she was just following the orders from the man who was her superior officer… and the father of her child. I mean, after all, women don't act like this—do they? We are the quiet demure ones in the back of the room, coerced, and co-opted.

I'm not sure what is worse. On the one hand the general public sees this as going against the very character of women, and to explain that away they have used her class background and personal sexual history. On another hand, she has been portrayed as lacking

all ability to think for herself, as a demure figure, quiet, and intimidated into performing these abusive acts by her lover and superior officer. So which does she get to be? The madonna, the whore, the abuser or the victim?

The nature of oppression is a tricky one and in this case the nature of oppression is even more confusing. Surely we can recognize that there are elements here that placed England in a double bind, which reduced her options to act differently. After all, she is a woman who was involved with her superior officer who in fact got pregnant by him and delivered his child in October. She was a member of a military who in the very worst of our imagination sent down direct orders to violently humiliate and degrade the prisoners of Abu Ghraib and at the very best sent down a vague directive for soldiers to interpret. She is a member of a military who is not only untrained in the formalities of the Geneva conventions, but were unclear whether or not they applied to the prisoners of Abu Ghraib. In all these cases she was restricted, not only as a member of the military, but also as a woman.

Still England had a choice and because of this choice we can see some very different meanings to the nature of her oppression. She was a member of a military who has degraded and oppressed an entire country for capitalist gains. From this perspective England is not oppressed, but an oppressor. The same oppression she has been subject to as a woman, she helped to perpetrate on a country a thousand times over. While the nature of her oppression often appears to have limited her options and confined her judgment, it has also meant that her opportunities have been enlarged at the expense of others, namely the prisoners of Abu Ghraib and the citizens of Iraq.

Two things are very apparent in the Lynndie England case. The first is that we on the left have dropped the ball in terms of our examination of the portrayal of her and the complicated nature of oppression in this instance. I suggest we pick it up again. The second thing that has been made very apparent is that Lynndie