

WHAT IF WOMEN RULED THE WORLD?

It's a question as old as civilization. We feel it more urgently this season with a woman one vote and a heartbeat away from commanding the world's most powerful military machine. All along it's been a truism that war is the plaything of men, "Kings of the Hill," and related to their levels of testosterone. Unquestionably, men have a lot to account for, not least how women have been physically abused, disenfranchised, and suppressed over two thousand years or more.

Nonetheless, the best scientific evidence about the relationship of testosterone and aggression is that testosterone responds to external conditions, not the reverse: testosterone levels rise after some event that provokes aggressive behavior; yet when men cuddle an infant, their testosterone levels go down. In experiments using computer war games, both men and women with high levels of self-confidence, competitiveness and risk-taking were more likely to 'go to war'; but their actions were unrelated to measured levels of testosterone. If such over-confident persons become our leaders they may carry out the self-fulfilling prophecy that it is 'easier to make war than peace.' As the poet John Davidson wrote, "And blood in torrents pour/ In vain – always in vain,/ For war breeds war again."

If Sarah Palin (known in both admiration and disdain as "Sarah Barracuda" for her competitiveness) is a moose-hunting, snowmobiling, "What's the difference between a hockey mom and a pit bull? Lipstick" person, does this indicate she would be more aggressive on a world stage, lead us again into war? Perhaps, perhaps not. What does history teach us about strong women leaders?

The record is mixed. Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia in the 18th and 19th centuries, had no compunctions about conducting war to enlarge and strengthen her empire. In 1588 Queen Elizabeth I inspired England's greatest military victory over the Spanish Armada. In modern times Prime Minister Golda Meir of Israel was known as the 'Iron Lady,' and the "best man in the government." Another 'iron lady', Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of England, had no second thoughts about going to war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands. After Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, Thatcher famously warned a hesitant George H.W. Bush, "This is no time to go wobbly." It might be argued, however, that these women grew up in a male-dominated system and had to crash through leaded-glass ceilings to make themselves known, respected, even feared.

On the other hand we have strong-willed women leaders whose devotion to justice matches their determination to oppose war and violence: Tarja Halonen of Finland, Angela Merkel of Germany, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia. Women have been fierce warriors throughout history, but also fierce advocates of non-violent protest and resistance. One example is the group Woman Against Military Madness (WAMM, www.worldwidewamm.org), founded in Minneapolis. Another powerful group was the

Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who bravely marched every week protesting against the fascist Argentine regime that abducted children in the “Dirty War” of 1976-1983. Then again, two of the 20th century’s greatest exponents of non-violence were men: Martin Luther King and Mohandas Gandhi.

Being a leader does not require a person to be hyper-aggressive. Individual women are like individual men: they may be either combative or pacific. Biological explanations alone are inadequate to explain aggression. It is a fact, by culture more than biology, that women intensely look out for the welfare of their children and families – in health, education, nutrition, ethical and moral upbringing; and above all for their safety. I want to believe that if ‘women ruled the world’ their priorities would be human security over military security, and would make the world a much less dangerous place for us all. As pioneer feminist Betty Friedan wrote in her acclaimed manifesto, “Who knows what women can be when they are finally free to become themselves? Who knows what women’s intelligence will contribute when it can be nourished?”

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