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USA

Something That Might Be Called Neocon:" Hillary Clinton & Corporate Feminism

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Assuming Hillary Clinton runs for president in 2016, much of her popular support will be based on her image as an advocate of women's rights. During her 2008 candidacy, the National Organization of Women (NOW) [endorsed Clinton](#) based on her "long history of support for women's empowerment." A group of 250 academics and activists calling themselves "[Feminists for Clinton](#)" praised her "powerful, inspiring advocacy of the human rights of women" and her "enormous contributions" as a policymaker. Since then, NOW and other mainstream women's organizations have been eagerly [anticipating her 2016 candidacy](#). Clinton and supporters have recently stepped up efforts to portray her as a champion of both [women's](#) and [LGBT rights](#).

Such depictions have little basis in Clinton's past performance. While she has indeed spoken about gender and sexual rights with considerable frequency, and while she may not share the overtly misogynistic and anti-LGBT views of most Republican politicians, as a policymaker she has consistently favored policies devastating to women and LGBT persons.

Why, then, does she continue to enjoy such support from self-identified feminists? Part of the answer surely lies in the [barrage of sexist attacks](#) that have targeted her and the understandable desire of many feminists to see a woman president. But that's not the whole story. We suggest that feminist enthusiasm for Hillary Clinton is reflective of a profound crisis of U.S. liberal feminism, which has long embraced or accepted corporate capitalism, racism, empire, and even heterosexism and transphobia.

Making Profit and War

All issues of wealth, power, and violence are also women's and LGBT rights issues. For instance, neoliberal economic policies of austerity and privatization disproportionately hurt women and LGBT individuals, who are often the lowest paid and the first workers to be fired, the most likely to bear the burdens of family maintenance, and the most affected by the involuntary migration, domestic violence, homelessness, and mental illness that are intensified by poverty.

Hillary Clinton's record on such issues is hardly encouraging. Her decades of service on corporate boards and in major policy roles as First Lady, U.S. Senator, and Secretary of State give a clear indication of where she stands. One of Clinton's first high-profile public positions was at [Walmart](#), where she served on the board from 1986 to 1992. She "[remained silent](#)" in board meetings as her company "waged a major campaign against labor unions seeking to represent store workers," as an ABC review of video recordings later noted.

Clinton recounted in her 2003 book that Walmart CEO Sam Walton "taught me a great deal about corporate integrity and success." Though she later began trying to shed her public identification with the company in order to attract labor support for her Senate and presidential candidacies, [Walmart executives](#) have continued to look favorably on her, with Alice Walton donating the maximum amount to the "Ready for Hillary" Super PAC in 2013. Walton's \$25,000 donation was considerably higher than the average annual salary for Walmart's hourly employees, [two-thirds](#) of whom are women.

After leaving Walmart, Clinton became perhaps the most active First Lady in history. While it would be unfair to hold her responsible for all her husband's policies, she did play a significant role in shaping and justifying many of them. In

her 2003 memoir she boasted of her role in gutting U.S. welfare: "By the time Bill and I left the White House, welfare rolls had dropped 60 percent" and not because poverty had dropped. [Women and children](#), the main recipients of welfare, have been the primary victims. Jeffrey St. Clair at Counterpunch [notes](#) that prior to the welfare reform, "more than 70 percent of poor families with children received some kind of cash assistance. By 2010, less than 30 percent got any kind of cash aid and the amount of the benefit had declined by more than 50 percent from pre-reform levels."

Clinton also [lobbied Congress](#) to pass her husband's deeply racist crime bill, which, observes Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow*, "escalated the drug war beyond what conservatives had imagined possible," expanding mass incarceration and the death penalty.

Arguably the two most defining features of Clinton's tenures as Senator (2001-2009) and Secretary of State (2009-2013) were her promotion of U.S. corporate profit-making and her aggressive assertion of the U.S. government's right to intervene in foreign countries. Reflecting on this performance as Clinton left her Secretary post in January 2013, Bloomberg Businessweek [commented](#) that "Clinton turned the State Department into a machine for promoting U.S. business." She sought "to install herself as the government's highest-ranking business lobbyist," directly negotiating lucrative overseas contracts for U.S. corporations like Boeing, Lockheed, and General Electric. Not surprisingly, "Clinton's corporate cheerleading has won praise from business groups."

Clinton herself has been very honest about this aim, albeit not when speaking in front of progressives. Her 2011 Foreign Policy essay on "[America's Pacific Century](#)" spoke at length about the objective of "opening new markets for American businesses," containing no fewer than ten uses of the phrases "open markets," "open trade," and permutations thereof. A major focus of this effort is the [Trans-Pacific Partnership](#) involving twelve Pacific countries that is now being negotiated secretly by the Obama administration with the assistance of over 600 corporate "advisors." Like Bill Clinton's [NAFTA](#), the deal is intended to further empower multinational corporations at the expense of workers, consumers, and the environment in all countries involved. Lower wages and increased rates of displacement, detention, and physical violence for female and LGBT populations are among the likely consequences, given the results of existing "free-trade" agreements.

Clinton's article also elaborated on the role of U.S. military power in advancing these economic goals. The past "growth" of eastern Asia has depended on "the security and stability that has long been guaranteed by the U.S. military," and "a more broadly distributed military presence across the region will provide vital advantages" in the future. Clinton thus reaffirmed the bipartisan consensus on the U.S. right to use military force abroad in pursuit of economic interest—echoing, for instance, her husband's Secretary of Defense William Cohen, who in 1999 reserved the right to "the unilateral use of military power" in the name of "ensuring [uninhibited access](#) to key markets, energy supplies, and strategic resources."

In the Middle East and Central Asia, Clinton has likewise defended the U.S. right to violate international law and human rights. As Senator she not only voted in favor of the illegal 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq—a monstrous crime that has killed hundreds of thousands of people while [sowing terror and sectarianism across the region](#)—she was an outspoken advocate of the invasion and a fierce critic of resistance within the United Nations. Since then she has only [partially disavowed](#) that position ([out of political expediency](#)) while speaking in [paternalistic and racist terms](#) about Iraqis. Senator Clinton was an especially staunch supporter—even by the standards of the U.S. Congress—of Israel's [illegal military actions](#) and settlement activity in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Hillary Clinton and Benjamin Netanyahu.

As Barack Obama's Secretary of State, she presided over the expansion of illegal drone attacks that by conservative

estimates have killed [many hundreds of civilians](#), while reaffirming U.S. [alliances with vicious dictatorships](#). As she recounts in her 2014 memoir *Hard Choices*, "In addition to our work with the Israelis, the Obama Administration also increased America's own sea and air presence in the Persian Gulf and deepened our ties to the Gulf monarchies."

Clinton herself is widely recognized to have been one of the administration's most forceful advocates of [attacking or expanding](#) military operations in Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria and of strengthening U.S. ties to dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Morocco, and elsewhere. Maybe the women and girls of these countries, including those whose lives have been destroyed by U.S. bombs, can take comfort in knowing that a "feminist" helped craft U.S. policy.

Secretary Clinton and her team worked to ensure that any challenges to U.S.-Israeli domination of the Middle East were met with brute force and/or various forms of collective punishment. On Iran, she often echoes the bipartisan line that "all options must remain on the table"â€"a flagrant violation of the UN Charter's [prohibition](#) of "the threat or use of force" in international relationsâ€"and brags in *Hard Choices* that her team "successfully campaigned around the world to impose crippling sanctions" on the country.

She ensured that Palestine's UN statehood bid "went nowhere in the Security Council." Though out of office by the time of Israel's savage 2014 assault on Gaza, [she ardently defended it in interviews](#). This context helps explain her recent praise for [Henry Kissinger](#), renowned for bombing civilians and supporting regimes that killed and tortured hundreds of thousands of suspected dissidents. She writes in the *Washington Post* that she "relied on his counsel when I served as secretary of state."

Militarization and Its Benefits

In another domain of traditional U.S. ownership, Latin America, Clinton also seems to have followed Kissinger's example. As confirmed in her 2014 book, she effectively supported the 2009 military overthrow of left-of-center Honduran President Manuel Zelayaâ€"a "caricature of a Central American strongman"â€"by pushing for a "compromise" solution that endorsed his illegal ouster. She has advocated the application of the [Colombia](#) modelâ€"highly militarized "anti-drug" initiatives coupled with neoliberal economic policiesâ€"to other countries in the region, and is full of praise for the devastating militarization of Mexico over the past decade. In Mexico that model has resulted in 80,000 or more deaths since 2006, including the 43 Mexican student activists disappeared (and presumably massacred) in September 2014.

In the Caribbean, the U.S. model of choice is Haiti, where Clinton and her husband have relentlessly promoted the sweatshop model of production since the 1990s. WikiLeaks documents show that in 2009 her State Department collaborated with subcontractors for Hanes, Levi's, and Fruit of the Loom to oppose [a minimum wage increase for Haitian workers](#). After the January 2010 earthquake she helped spearhead the [highly militarized](#) U.S. response.

Militarization has plentiful benefits, as Clinton understands. It can facilitate corporate investment, such as the ["gold rush"](#) that the U.S. ambassador described following the Haiti earthquake. It can keep in check nonviolent dissidents, such as hungry Haitian workers or leftist students in Mexico. And it can help combat the influence of countries like Venezuela which have challenged neoliberalism and U.S. geopolitical control.

These goals have long motivated U.S. hostility toward Cuba, and thus Clinton's recent call for ending the U.S. embargo against Cuba was pragmatic, not principled: "It wasn't achieving its goals" of overthrowing the government, as she says in her recent book. The goal there, as in Venezuela, is to compel the country to "restore private property and return to a free market economy," as she [demanded of Venezuela](#) in 2010.

A reasonable synopsis of Clinton's record around the world comes from neoconservative policy advisor Robert Kagan, who, like Clinton, played an important role in advocating the 2003 Iraq invasion. "I feel comfortable with her on foreign policy," Kagan told the [New York Times](#) last June. Asked what to expect from a Hillary Clinton presidency, Kagan predicted that "[i]f she pursues a policy which we think she will pursue, it's something that might have been called neocon." But, he added, "clearly her supporters are not going to call it that; they are going to call it something else."

Women's and LGBT Rights, Narrowly Defined

What about Clinton's record on that narrower set of issues more commonly associated with women's and LGBT rights—control over one's reproductive system and freedom from discrimination and sexual violence? Perhaps the best that can be said is that Clinton does not espouse the medieval view of female bodily autonomy shared by most Republicans, and does not actively encourage homophobia and transphobia. She has consistently said that abortion should remain [legal (but "rare")-

http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/13/nyregion/13hillary.ready.html?pagewanted=print&_r=0] and that birth control should be widely available, and when in office generally acted in accord with those statements. She has recently voiced support for gay marriage rights. These positions are worth something, even if they are mainly a reflection of pressure from below.

But nor does her record on these rights merit glowing praise. In addition to [partly capitulating](#) to the far-right anti-choice agenda in Congress, with disproportionate harm to low-income parents, Clinton and other Democrats have also actively undermined these rights. Some observers have argued that Clinton's repetition of the Democratic slogan that abortion should be "safe, legal, and rare" [reinforces the stigmatization of those who choose that option](#).

Her narrow definition of reproductive rights—as abortion and contraception only—does not allow much in the way of material support for parents or young children. She insists that abortion must remain "rare," but has also helped deprive poor expecting parents of the financial support they would need to raise a child (for instance, through the [1996 welfare reform](#) and the [fiscal austerity](#) regarding social programs that has become the bipartisan consensus in Washington). She has supported the further militarization of the Mexico border and the arrest of undocumented immigrants, undermining the reproductive rights of women who give birth [in chains in detention centers](#) before being deported back to lives of poverty and violence.

Regarding non-discrimination, Clinton's record is also worse than her reputation suggests. Her old company Walmart, widely accused of discriminating against [women employees](#), was recently praised by the Clinton Foundation for its ["efforts to empower girls and women."](#) Clinton has given little serious indication that she opposes discrimination against LGBT individuals in the workplace (which is still legal in the majority of U.S. states). Her very recent reversal of her opposition to gay marriage came only after support for the idea has become politically beneficial and perhaps necessary for Democrats. At best, Clinton in these respects has been a cautious responder to progressive political winds rather than a trailblazing leader.

Clinton's foreign policy record is even more at odds with her reputation as a champion of women's and LGBT rights. Her policy of support for the 2009 coup in Honduras has been disastrous for both groups. Violent hate crimes against LGBT Hondurans have skyrocketed. In mid-2014, leading LGBT activist Nelson Aramb  reported [176 murders against LGBT individuals since 2009](#), an average of about 35 per year, compared to just over one per year in the period 1994-2009.

ArambÃ° located this violence within the broader [human rights nightmare](#) of post-coup Honduras, noting the contributions of U.S.-funded militarization and the post-coup regimes' pattern of "shutting down government institutions charged with promoting and protecting the human rights of vulnerable sectors of the population" such as women, children, indigenous communities, and Afro-Hondurans." Clinton has been worse than silent on the situation, actively [supporting](#) and [praising](#) the post-coup governments.

In a review of her work as [Secretary of State](#), Middle East scholar Stephen Zunes concludes that while "Hillary Clinton has been more outspoken than any previous Secretary of State regarding the rights of women and sexual minorities," this position is "more rhetoric than reality." As one example he points to the U.S.-backed monarchy in Morocco, which has long occupied Western Sahara with U.S. support. Two weeks after Secretary Clinton publicly praised the dictatorship for having "[protected and expanded](#)" [women's rights](#), a teenage girl named Amina Filali [committed suicide](#) by taking rat poison. Filali had been raped at age 15 and then "forced to marry her rapist, who subsequently battered and abused her."

Although Clinton's liberal supporters are likely to lament such details as exceptions within an impressive overall record ("She's still much better than a Republican!"), it is quite possible that her actions have harmed feminist movements worldwide. As Zunes argues:

Given Clinton's backing of neo-liberal economic policies and war-making by the United States and its allies, her advocacy of women's rights overseas...may have actually set back indigenous feminist movements in the same way that the Bush administration's "democracy-promotion" agenda was a serious setback to popular struggles for freedom and democracy....Hillary Clinton's call for greater respect for women's rights in Muslim countries never had much credibility while US-manufactured ordinance is blowing up women in Lebanon, Gaza, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Threading Needles

This summary of Clinton's "enormous contributions" (Feminists for Clinton) is just a partial sampling. On almost all other major issues, from climate change to immigration to education to financial regulation, President Hillary Clinton would likely be no better than President Obama, if not worse. [As in the case of Obama](#), it is of course necessary for Clinton to "call it something else," in Robert Kagan's words. The stark disjunction between rhetoric and policies reflects a well understood logic. Mainstream U.S. political candidates, particularly Democrats, must find ways to attract popular support while simultaneously reassuring corporate and financial elites.

The latter, for their part, usually understand the need for a good dose of "[populism](#)" during a campaign, and accept it as long as it stays within certain bounds and is not reflected in policy itself. One former aide to Bill Clinton, speaking to The Hill last July, compared this rhetorical strategy to [threading a needle](#), saying that "good politicians" and I think Hillary is a good politician" are good at threading needles, and I think there's probably a way to do it."

Hillary Clinton faces the challenge of convincing voters that she is a champion of "people historically excluded," as she claims in her 2014 memoir. The Hill reported that "Clinton is now test-driving various campaign themes," including the familiar progressive promises to "increase upward mobility" and "decrease inequality." Her memoirs, for those who dare to suffer through them, include invocations of dead leftists like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman ("one of my heroines"), and Martin Luther King, Jr. (referenced nine times in Clinton's 2003 book).

This public relations work requires that her past record be hidden from view, lest it create a credibility problem. Here Clinton has enjoyed the assistance of many liberal feminists. One former Obama staffer, speaking to The Hill, notes

Clinton's successful efforts "to co-opt the base groups in the past eight years."

Rhetoric is not totally meaningless. The extent to which politicians like Clinton have been compelled to portray themselves "however cynically" as champions of the rights of workers, women, LGBT people, and other "historically excluded" groups is an indication that popular pressures for those rights have achieved substantial force. In the case of LGBT rights this rhetorical shift is very recent, and reflects a growth in the movement's power that is to be celebrated. But taking politicians' rhetoric at face value is one of the gravest errors that a progressive can make.

The Feminists Not Invited

Liberal feminists' support of Hillary Clinton is not just due to credulousness, though. It also reflects a narrowness of analysis, vision, and values. In this country feminism is often understood as the right of women "and wealthy white women most of all" to share in the spoils of corporate capitalism and U.S. imperial power. By not confronting the exclusion of non-whites, foreigners, working-class people, and other groups from this vision, liberal feminists are missing a crucial opportunity to create a more inclusive, more powerful movement.

Alternative currents within the feminist movement, both here and globally, have long rejected this impoverished understanding of feminism. For them, feminism means confronting patriarchy but also capitalism, imperialism, white supremacy, and other forms of oppression that interlock with and reinforce patriarchy. It means fighting to replace a system in which the rights of people and other living things are systematically subordinated to the quest for profits. It means fighting so that all people "everywhere on the gender, sexual and body [spectrum](#)" can enjoy basic rights like food, health care, housing, a safe and clean environment, and control over their bodies, labor, and identities.

This more holistic feminist vision is apparent all around the world, including among the women of places like Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, whose oppression is constantly evoked by Western leaders to justify war and occupation. The courageous Pakistani teenager Malala Yousafzai, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her feminist advocacy, has also criticized [illegal U.S. drone attacks for killing civilians and aiding terrorist recruitment](#). Yousafzai's opposition to the Taliban won her adoring Western media coverage and an invitation to the Obama White House, but her criticism of drones has gone virtually unmentioned in the corporate media. Also unmentioned are her comments about socialism, which she says "is the only answer" to "free us from the chains of bigotry and exploitation."

The [Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan \(RAWA\)](#) has equally opposed the Taliban, U.S.-backed fundamentalist forces, and the U.S. occupation. While liberal groups like [Feminist Majority](#) have depicted the U.S. war as a noble crusade to protect Afghan women, [RAWA says](#) that the United States "has empowered and equipped the most traitorous, anti-democratic, misogynist and corrupt fundamentalist gangs in Afghanistan," merely "[replacing one fundamentalist regime with another.](#)"

The logic is simple: U.S. elites prefer the "[bloody and suffocating rule of Afghanistan](#)" by fundamentalist warlords "to an independent, pro-democracy, and pro-women's rights government" that might jeopardize "its interests in the region." Women's liberation "can be achieved only by the people of Afghanistan and by democracy-loving forces through a hard, decisive and long struggle". Needless to say, Clinton and Obama have not invited the RAWA women to Washington.

A group of Iranian and Iranian-American feminists, [the Raha Iranian Feminist Collective](#), takes a similar position in relation to their own country. In 2011 it bitterly condemned the Ahmadinejad regime's systematic violations of women's rights (and those of other groups), but just as forcefully condemned "all forms of US intervention," including the "crippling sanctions" that Hillary Clinton is so proud of her role in implementing. The group said that sanctions

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“further immiserate the very people they claim to be helping,” and noted that few if any genuine grassroots voices in Iran had “called for or supported the US/UN/EU sanctions.”

In Latin America, too, many working-class feminists argue that the fight for gender and sexual liberation is inseparable from the struggles for self-determination and a just economic system. Speaking to NACLA Report on the Americas, Venezuelan organizer Yanahir Reyes recently lauded “all of the social policy” that has “focused on liberating women” under Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro, those evil autocrats so despised by Hillary Clinton. Reyes emphasized the importance of independent feminist organizing: “Women from the feminist struggle have effectively brought to light the importance of dismantling a patriarchal system,” thus pushing [Chavismo in a more feminist direction](#). “It is a very hard internal fight,” says Reyes, but “this is the space where we can achieve it” under a government sympathetic to socialism, “not in a different form of government.”

This tradition of more holistic feminisms is not absent from the United States. In the 19th century, Black women like Ida B. Wells and Sojourner Truth linked the struggles for abolition and suffrage and denounced the lynching campaigns that murdered black men and women in the name of “saving” white women. In contrast, leaders of the white suffrage movement like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony refused to include people of color in the struggle for citizenship rights. Unfortunately this history continues to be distorted. In 2008 Gloria Steinem, the standard bearer of liberal feminism, said that [she supported Clinton’s campaign](#) over Obama’s in part because “Black men were given the vote a half-century before women of any race were allowed to mark a ballot.”

The assumption that all women are equally oppressed by patriarchy (and that all men are equal oppressors) was fiercely challenged by U.S. women of color, working-class women, and lesbians in the 1970s and 1980s. Feminists of color analyzed their gender and sexual oppression within the larger history of U.S. slavery, capitalism, and empire. In New York the women of the [Young Lords Party](#) pushed their organization to denounce forced sterilizations of women of color, to demand safe and accessible abortion and contraception, and to call for community-controlled clinics. They redefined reproductive rights as the right to abortion and contraception and the right to have children without living in poverty.

In recent years, a radical LGBT movement has fought for reforms like marriage equality while also moving beyond marriage and condemning how the state, from prisons to the military, is the biggest perpetrator of violence against gender and sexual non-conforming peoples, particularly trans women of color and undocumented queers. These queer radicals [reject the logic](#) that casts the United States and Israel as tolerant while characterizing occupied territories, from U.S. to Palestinian ghettos, as inherently homophobic and in need of [military and other outside intervention](#). They condemn U.S. wars and the Obama administration’s persecution of [whistleblowers like Chelsea Manning](#) (who helped expose, among other U.S. crimes, military orders to ignore the sexual abuse of Iraqi detainees and the trafficking of Afghan children).

A more robust vision of feminism doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t defend women like Hillary Clinton against sexist attacks: we should, just as we defend Barack Obama against racist ones. But it does mean that we must listen to the voices of the most marginalized women and gender and sexual minorities—many of whom are extremely critical of Clintonite feminism—and act in solidarity with movements that seek equity in all realms of life and for all people. These are the feminists not invited to the Hillary Clinton party, except perhaps to serve and clean up.