

# H-Net Reviews

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**Tom Digby.** *Love and War: How Militarism Shapes Sexuality and Romance.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. 240 pp. \$22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-16841-0; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-16840-3.



**Reviewed by** Andrew Huebner (University of Alabama)

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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

In Culture Club's hit song of 1983, "Karma Chameleon," Boy George sings, "Every day is like survival / You're my lover, not my rival." These lyrics encapsulate Tom Digby's subject of analysis in his wonderful book, *Love and War: How Militarism Shapes Sexuality and Romance*. In militaristic societies like the United States (he uses the term "war-reliant"), heterosexual relationships are widely understood to be adversarial. Digby's book argues that one causes the other—that the obsession with war cultivates the tendency to see love as a "battle of the sexes."

For Digby, the association between love and war begins with the prescribed gender arrangements of militaristic societies. Civilizations that make war tend to value tough, emotionally distant men. They imagine the military as a wholly male institution and are inundated with what Digby calls a "faith in masculine force" (p. 9). If soldiers will be expected to kill other human beings, they need to be programmed to discipline their sympathetic impulses. Women, alternatively, are expected to reproduce and to submit to men. Because war-reliant societies are dependent on reproduction to develop new warriors, they often ban anti-procreative behaviors, such as homosexuality and abortion. Young males who are sensitive, passive, unwilling to be violent, or uninterested

in heterosexual sex—or who are just too much like girls—suffer ostracism or physical harm. Digby finds support for his claims across the landscape of public culture, from the news media to the statements of public officials to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche to the music of Britney Spears.

So how does all this affect sexuality and romance? The gender dynamics of militaristic civilizations are good for war, Digby argues, but bad for love. Men who feel the need to ration sympathy leave many women unsupported. They make emotionally compromised fathers. Male resentment festers when wives outpace their husbands as breadwinners (an increasingly common reality), robbing men of the power over women they are culturally conditioned to expect. In the worst cases, the celebration of warrior masculinity and violence, the subordination of women, and men's frustrated gender ambitions can generate terrible social problems—deeply misogynistic pornography, hate crimes against gay men, and the raping or killing (or both) of women. Digby uses the apt phrase "gender terrorism" to describe the policing of gender boundaries, ranging from the bullying of "effeminate" boys to the threat of rape that inhibits the lives of millions of women.

Yet there is reason for hope, Digby argues; to paraphrase Pat Benatar, another rock star of the 1980s, love does not have to be a battlefield. Not all men are responding with violence to the correction of old asymmetries in gender roles. Some become househusbands or stay-at-home dads. Many more share equally in child-care duties and household chores. Even more deeply, military roles have become less dependent on male physical strength—therefore undermining the whole gender binary that sets men and women in opposition in the first place. This “degendering of war” has taken many forms, arising not only from increasingly progressive gender attitudes but also from the changing nature of modern threats (p. 153). The Pentagon lifted combat restrictions on women in 2013. Drones and other new technologies can be operated by anyone with the proper training. Men and women alike can fight cyber-terrorism. Managing humanitarian aid and economic development, perhaps the best ways to confront the poverty and alienation that drive so many people to extremism, requires no particular gender identity.

As should be expected for any work of social cri-

tique, readers will quarrel with Digby’s book in places. In my view, it occasionally takes a tone that is alternately impressionistic, overly general, or ahistorical. At least in the case of the United States, neither militarism nor gender politics has been static, uniform, or unchallenged across time. Popular attitudes toward love and war have varied further by educational background, economic station, political orientation, race or ethnic identification, and region. To Digby’s credit, in several places he does acknowledge tracking “patterns, not generalizations,” but in between, he goes long stretches without any such disclaimers (p. 83). I do not necessarily dispute his characterizations; as a historian, I would just like to see a more nuanced account of how they have developed the way they have.

These issues aside, Digby has produced an accessible, smart, persuasive work. It is filled with keen insights, illuminating connections, and heartbreaking examples. Anyone interested in gender, the military, or love should read this book—which is to say that almost everyone should read this book.

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