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The promised futures of military protection

Emily Clifford and Hannah Richards

In 2021, the House of Commons Defence Select Committee published a report entitled ‘Protecting Those Who Protect Us: Women in the Armed Forces from Recruitment to Civilian Life’. The report acknowledged that although the British military’s primary purpose was the protection of the nation, it was simultaneously failing to protect those within its own ranks, describing the prevalence of bullying, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape experienced by women within the military. Shortly after publication, the Ministry of Defence launched a series of policy measures that ostensibly signalled a ‘tougher’ approach towards sexual violence within the armed forces. Designed to “better support victims and secure justice for them” (MOD 2022), the measures positioned sexual violence as an issue that could be effectively tackled through the institution’s internal justice mechanisms. The suggestion here is of a future in which sexual violence simply does not exist within the military.

Yet, many query whether sexual violence is an inevitable outcome of militarism, warfighting, and soldiering (MacKenzie et al. 2020). The ‘soldier-hero’ is coded male and hard-wired to protect the nation at the behest of its ‘womenandchildren’ (Stiehm 1982; Åse and Wendt 2019). And yet, the power imbalance this invokes invites displays of masculinity far more toxic than the gentlemanly chivalry presumably intended (Higate 2012; Koeszegi et al. 2014). It is thus pertinent to ask whether Britain’s attachment to the soldier-hero obscures or excuses the violence that he wields (Cree 2018)? And what does this tell us about how the idea of protection is understood and acted upon in British military politics?

Whilst these questions have been impressively handled by the Critical Military Studies literature noted above, this intervention contributes a temporal analysis. We outline how a future politics of military protection – in which the future is instrumentalised to govern the present (see Ramsay 2020) – shapes Britain’s response to military sexual violence (MSV).

Protection’s temporal politics

As a structure of temporal and affective relationality, we see protection as a negotiated attachment to future security. Through this relation, the crises of the present are substituted for an investment in tomorrow, allowing us to envision ourselves as secure in and across time. This is fundamentally tied to subject formation; our expectations of the future are

wrapped into our present consciousness and imagined subjectivity, organising our actions in accordance with our assumed future selves (Bourdieu 2000). Promises of future stability and security thus attach themselves to subjectivities in the present, shaping assessments of risk and safety (Solomon 2014; Stern 2006).

At the same time, the promise of violence is central to the formation of (masculine) soldiering subjectivities (Basham 2015). Positioning military power in relation to promises of future violence – most often an unnamed war against an unnamed enemy – sustains the present-day politics of military exceptionalism necessary for the institution's survival. In other words, for militarism to thrive, the existence of future threats from which we, as a society, need protecting must be widely accepted. However, this sets up an unequal relation of power in which imagined societal and national futures are subsumed into military futures, leading to the legitimisation and even glorification of violence committed by the (assumed male) soldier-hero.

This dynamic is not unique to the British armed forces, but rather a constitutive part of military power. For example, the leniency shown to the Irish Defence Forces' Cathal Crotty, who beat Natasha O'Brien unconscious in May 2022, illustrates a cultural prioritisation of military futurity at the expense of women's wellbeing; Judge Tom O'Donnell suspended Crotty's entire three-year custodial sentence to preserve his military career (Moore 2024). At the same time, a focus on individual criminal responsibility draws lines around specific 'scandals', allowing 'rotten apples' to be excised from the institution and claims to be made about the unique pressures of military work (Duriesmith 2023; MacKenzie 2023). Violence committed by serving personnel is thus positioned on a sliding scale between tragic (yet temporary) errors of judgement to shocking (yet necessary) evils, always in relation to an honourable hegemonic military future.

In Britain, MSV is often situated at the former end of this scale. The promise of justice put forward by the British military hinges on a linear temporality of investigation, prosecution, and legal decision-making, in which errors are fixed, order restored, and a hegemonic future reinstated. The seeming progressiveness of this response signals to both claimants and the public that, firstly, the armed forces can build safe workplaces for women, and secondly, that female soldiers are fundamental to a 'new' military future. This messaging accompanies campaigns stressing the suitability of "snowflakes" and "me me me millennials" to the wider

military mission, ostensibly evolving the soldier-hero to account for both societal attitudes and the shifting nature of future national security threats (Higate and Manchanda 2018).

Protecting the future

Through the promise of a future untainted by MSV, the figure of the female soldier is sustained and re-integrated into a future imagination of a progressive military and, in turn, a more gender-equal national public. And yet, for those living in the aftermath of MSV, the future may no longer hold salience as a reference point for present-day security. Experiencing feelings of “blame, shame and betrayal” (Gray et al. 2023, 80), they might struggle to identify with the promise of military justice and, as such, suffer temporal isolation both in the workplace and within the wider national narrative. In such cases, the promise of military protection loses its potency as questions re-emerge about the dangers of masculinist military culture (Sabbagh 2021).

Nonetheless, the political strength of the British military’s MSV response lies in its manipulation of the future to organise the present; the imagined future of military justice illuminates the progressive nature of the armed forces whilst foreclosing critique of their gender politics. In this sense, semantics matter. In response to the Select Committee’s inquiry into servicewomen’s experiences, Dr Andrew Murrison (2023) – then Minister for Defence People – spoke of how “we are on the right track in terms of culture and issues like complaints”. This narrative substitutes the present-day for an anticipated future, concealing the conditionality of everyday military justice.

This move is part of a wider political project. The military future promised to the female soldier is reliant upon “confusing the era of the present tense with an imminent yet obscure future”, a “posthistorical [...] space of possibility that transcends the fractures and hierarchies of national life” (Berlant 1997, 30, 27). Her protection from MSV is then a foregone conclusion in the military’s journey towards a secure national future. Rather than being excluded from ideas of military exceptionalism, servicewomen with experience of MSV become central to the political time of military justice and its imagined progressive and effective future fighting force. Through this militarised national allegory, they bear a burden unlike that of their male counterparts, becoming both a reminder of the violence of military power and a surrogate for national expectations. With this, they are temporalized outside the political present tense, representing neither the nation nor the military, but the *desire for* and *future of* these institutions.

Fragile promises

And yet, the enduring temporalities of MSV – felt through the painful memories, fears of future safety, and everyday coping mechanisms – reveal the fragile and illusory efforts underpinning the British military’s protection promise. To qualify as the subject of protection, the female soldier must hold a coherent and anticipatory public identity. She must be both cognisant of the ills of the institution and committed to its future. This requires the swift forgetting of the ways in which gender functions to discipline the military subject, along with an unequivocal acceptance of the military as a force for (future) good. However, the experiential times of servicewomen living through MSV bring into sharp relief the impossibility of these conditions. The enforced linearity of military justice effaces the “twists, folds, tears, and crumples” (Mulla 2019, 255) in their narratives, denying their temporal complexity and the ways in which their experiences linger and endure (Brison 2002; Clark 2023). To challenge such treatment would be to admit relegation to a “different social tense”, their futures “incommensurable” with the “hegemonic future” (Ramsay 2017, 534, 524) of British militarism. As such, they navigate a present in which crises and loss are ever immanent.

The promise of a future in which MSV is eradicated, and servicewomen are protected, thus productively capitalises on the interplay between tenses; whilst ideas about the future give meaning to the present, this is sustained by the future’s ultimate unattainability. This re-institutionalises the female soldier whilst re-naturalising the military’s role as a protective force, relieved of its need to address institutional violence. In recognising the diverse temporal patterns contained within MSV discourse, then, we highlight the everyday violence inflicted upon servicewomen whilst problematising the tacit formations of military power reproduced through promises of protection.

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