

# 14

## Evening Gowns to Burqas

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### The Propaganda of Fame

*Margaret Cavin*

*What is the biggest thing I could bring to the table for these women to get their situation known to the world and be a voice for the people whose voice has been stolen? My husband's fame.  
(M. N. Leno, personal communication, August 2, 2001)*



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**Figure 14.1** Mavis Leno, wife of the *Tonight Show* host, Jay Leno

Before most citizens of the United States were even aware of this ancient crossroad nation, Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan and installed a puppet regime in Kabul in 1979. The United States, China, Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia then offered support to the *mujahideen* “freedom fighters” who began a guerrilla war against the Soviets. Once these *mujahideen* forces removed the Soviet-backed government from power, rival militias fought for control. One of these rival militias was the Taliban, a group of young men usually under the age of 30 who adhered to a very conservative form of Islam. With the help of America’s CIA, there to help the Afghan people fight Soviet expansionism, the Taliban formed a military force. The Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989, and 7 years later, the Taliban seized military control of the country. Immediately after doing so, they implemented two decisions that led to their country’s contribution to the terror narrative. The Taliban offered Osama bin Laden refuge soon after they took power, and they immediately and drastically changed the conditions and rights for women in that country, motivated by their strict interpretation of Islamic law.

Before 1996 and since the 1960s, Afghan women held professional jobs in all the major professions such as teachers, physicians, and lawyers; they also held political office and were free to go out in public places. While many wore the traditional burqa, this was a reflection of their Islamic religious practice and was, to a large extent, practiced by individual choice. Once the Taliban took control of the country, they installed a fundamentalist form of Islamic religion as the law of the land. Among some of the changes in conditions for women were a moratorium on work for women and very strict guidelines inhibiting a woman’s ability to step outside her home; for example, they were only allowed to beg in the streets for food if they did not have a male relative or a male child older than 6 years who could beg for them. The windows on homes were blackened so that no one could see women inside; women were forced to wear burqas at all times when they were in public, and if any part of their skin showed, severe punishment in the form of beatings or death were exacted. Women were also required to wear soft-soled shoes so that their presence would be quiet. In addition, women and female children were not allowed to be educated or to even be allowed to read a book. Also, because women physicians were not allowed to practice medicine and male doctors could not see the nakedness of women, many females died from childbirth and other preventable traumas and illnesses. Eventually, the Taliban allowed a few locations with the most primitive tools and conditions to provide female physicians for the care of women and female children, but concessions to the human dignity of females were tiny and very slow in coming; thus, depression and suicide became serious problems among women in the country.

Journalists were not allowed to enter the country so examples of abuse were “smuggled” out by women who risked their lives to communicate the abuse to the outside world. Later, it was learned that a journalist, Saira Shah, and an organization of Arab women (RAWA [Revolutionary Association Women in Afghanistan]) were at the time surreptitiously filming the conditions, dangers, and punishments of women and female children. Their efforts culminated in the award-winning documentary *Beneath the Veil* (June 2001). There were also women who secretly worked to educate the female children in their homes, and they were helped by RAWA, which clandestinely provided educational materials. However, their efforts were very limited because of the danger of exposure.

In 1998, the United States launched missiles at an alleged terrorist training camp and Osama bin Laden, in retribution for the bombing of embassies in Africa. Later, in 1999, the United Nations (UN) placed an air embargo and froze Taliban assets in order to force them to turn over bin Laden for trial. In 2001, the UN added an arms embargo against the Taliban, and also by this time, a record drought, cold, and civil war forced an estimated 200,000 more Afghans into refugee camps.

In March 2001, disregarding a public and international outcry, the Taliban destroyed two 2,000-year-old Buddhist statues in the cliffs above Bamian. Religious minorities were ordered to wear tags identifying them as non-Muslims, and Hindu women were forced to veil themselves like other Afghan women. Also, the Taliban banned the use of movies, playing cards, computer disks, Internet, satellite TV, musical instruments, and chessboards, saying they were against Islamic law.

On September 11, 2001, Al Qaeda terrorists attacked the U.S. World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Afraid of U.S. revenge, more than 4,000 Afghans began to flee each day across the border into Pakistan. At the same time, the U.S. demanded that the Taliban turn over bin Laden and Al Qaeda members, but the Taliban leaders responded that they would give bin Laden to the United States only if they were given evidence of his guilt. By the end of September, the Taliban called for a *jihad* against America if the U.S. forces entered Afghanistan. On October 7, the United States began to bomb strategic Taliban sites in Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden issued a statement calling on all Muslims to wage a holy war against the United States. Soon the United States began a ground assault against the Taliban and sent in special operations forces to hunt for bin Laden. In December 2001, the Taliban surrendered power, and the United States asserted that Al Qaeda had been destroyed in Afghanistan even though bin Laden was never located. Also during this time, Afghanistan agreed in principle to a UN peacekeeping force. By May 2003, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said that most of Afghanistan

is secure and stabilized, but pro-Taliban insurgents continue to regularly attack government buildings, aid workers, and U.S. bases as “war lords” profit from the illegal cultivation of poppies.

## The Ideology and Purpose of the Propaganda Campaign

Feminists were some of the first to communicate the Taliban’s repression of women in Afghanistan. In particular, the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), located in Beverly Hills, California, quickly became involved. Fighting against the clear violation of women’s rights, safety, and health occurring under Taliban rule was in keeping with the purpose of the organization. The foundation states on its Web site that it is “dedicated to women’s equality, reproductive health, and non-violence. In all spheres, FMF utilizes research and action to empower women economically, socially, and politically. Our organization believes that feminists—both women and men, girls and boys—are the majority, but this majority must be empowered.” Furthermore, the specific purpose of FMF’s campaign for Afghan women and girls is communicated on its Web site as well: It “is a public education and grassroots effort that has brought the human rights catastrophe to national and international attention” (<http://www.feminist.org/welcome/index.html>).

The first part of the rhetorical campaign included agitating for global awareness and discovering methods of giving aid to these women in the form of money, food, educational materials, and so on. However, after September 11, 2001, when the United States was clearly headed for war with Afghanistan, FMF’s language changed, predominantly demonstrated by its spokesperson, Mavis Leno. Her demands still included aid for the women and female children, but she added a call for the removal of the Taliban, the stated source of the repression of women and girls in Afghanistan. She also wanted to bring to light the plight of Afghan women by making it a part of the world’s reporting on the war once it began and to emphatically state that women’s rights would be a nonnegotiable part of a post-Taliban Afghanistan.

## The Context in Which the Propaganda Occurs

The following analysis focuses on the rhetorical narratives created by Mavis Leno and how they were used in the media, starting with her involvement as chair of FMF early in 1997 and culminating with her rhetoric immediately before and after September 11, 2001. The importance of September 11,

2001, for this analysis is that it represents a turning point in her work and marks a specific change in the media characterization of Leno's identity. These changes represent a specific shift in focus and a move toward a use of entertainment forms as methods of white propaganda. The rhetorical documents used for this examination include all of the media events involving Ms. Leno that were provided to me by FMF, dating from October 21, 1998, to October 6, 2001. They are entertainment talk shows, news broadcasts, a press conference, and a town hall meeting. In addition, I interviewed Mavis Leno twice at the FMF headquarters (the first in Los Angeles and the second in its new facility in Beverly Hills). The first interview was conducted August 2, 2001, the month before September 11, 2001, and the second was January 15, 2004.

## Identification of the Propagandist and the Structure of the Propaganda Organization

Since my early childhood I have been especially obsessed by things that aren't fair; I can't stand things that aren't fair. I'm really demented on that. And also, I have a very strong impulse to rescue people, to ride to the aid of somebody. I can't stand to see people frightened. If I see someone frightened, I have to take fear away from them, if I can. So I guess, all of those things played a role. (M. N. Leno, personal communication, January 15, 2004)

Mavis Nicholson Leno is the chair of the Feminist Majority Foundation's Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan and has been one of the most outspoken rhetors on its behalf. Leno joined the Board of Directors of the FMF in 1997 after playing a role in the attempt to defeat Proposition 209, the anti-affirmative action initiative on the 1996 California ballot.

Also in her role as chair, she testified on gender apartheid in March 1998 before Senator Diane Feinstein of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee and worked to persuade the Clinton and Bush administrations as well as the U.S. Congress to restore women's rights in Afghanistan. She was successful in defeating the energy company UNOCAL's determination to construct an oil pipeline across Afghanistan that would have provided the Taliban with more than \$100 million and significantly increased their control in the region.

She is presently a leader in the attempt to make the reestablishment of women's rights a nonnegotiable part of a post-Taliban Afghanistan, and she has consistently been a vanguard to ensure that the terrible predicament of the Afghanistan women is communicated by the media when they report the

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war and postwar Afghanistan. Leno has appeared on many interview and talk shows such as *Larry King Live*, *The Today Show*, *The Tonight Show*, *The View*, *CNN With Paula Zahn*, *Hardball With Chris Mathews*, *Hannity & Colmes*, *CNN Morning News*, *FOX News*, and *MSNBC Nightly News*; she has appeared in popular entertainment shows such as *Extra*, *E! News Daily*, *Access Hollywood*, *Entertainment Tonight*, and *Entertainment Weekly* and has been interviewed for articles in *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Vanity Fair*, *US Magazine*, *People Magazine*, *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*.

When Leno first became involved with FMF, as she has explained in many interviews (including mine), she had been unaware of the plight of the women of Afghanistan. She was surprised that she had been unaware because she reads a lot of books (approximately 10 per week), and she clearly thought that the American press had been negligent in their omission of the story. She explained to me in our second interview that she has always felt passionate about injustice, and when someone is a victim, she is eager to help. Leno had been involved in women's rights for many years and historically was involved on the level of stamping envelopes and working behind the scenes to contribute. But this time, she felt it was her "turn" and needed to "step up to the plate" (M. N. Leno, personal communication, January 15, 2004). She explained that she wanted to help but initially felt inadequate and focused on her weaknesses rather than her strengths. She believed herself to be shy and uncomfortable in speaking situations or situations where attention was placed on her. However, the cause was compelling, so she ignored her natural reticence and proceeded to become a central player in the unfolding drama.

In the campaign to end "gender apartheid" in Afghanistan, Leno acted as chair and was the visible leader in most media situations. The FMF has many goals with regard to the Campaign for Afghan Women and Girls. Before the terrorist attacks on American soil, the goals were to bring awareness to Americans on a grassroots level and then encourage Americans to write and call political leaders to put pressure on them to not acknowledge the Taliban as a legitimate government in Afghanistan. They also sought to raise funds to provide food, medical care, and educational resources for the women. Their message was urgent because women and female children were living in repressive conditions and dying in large numbers. Their campaign worked on the grassroots level, but FMF was also highly sophisticated in various forms of mass media such as print journalism, television, and the Internet. After the terrorist attacks in New York City, FMF's goals were to (a) increase peace-keeping forces, (b) support the Afghan Ministry for Women's Affairs, (c) support the Independent Human Rights Commission and Afghan women-led

nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), (d) instigate leadership of women in post-Taliban Afghanistan, and (e) expand and monitor the provision of emergency and reconstruction assistance to women and girls (<http://www.feminist.org/afghan/intro.asp>). The organization requested on its Web site that individuals choose to help them achieve these goals by doing one of the following: “Urge the Bush Administration to immediately expand troops in Afghanistan,” “Tell 10 friends,” “Donate \$25,” “Form an action team,” and “Buy Afghan crafts” (<http://www.feminist.org/afghan/intro.asp>). Individuals who donate money for the campaign are given a subscription to *Ms Magazine*, T-shirts, and Afghan crafts such as pillow cases, silk shawls, dolls, and holiday ornaments (<http://www.feminist.org/afghan/intro.asp>).

## The Target Audience

Considering the urgency of the problem, sophisticated use of the media became a crucial part of the strategy to reach the largest American audience possible. The goal was to persuade people to write and call political leaders, pressuring them to avoid doing business with the Taliban and advocating that they continue to refuse to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate leadership of Afghanistan. Leno made clear on many occasions to the press the fear that the Bush administration was considering changing the status of the Taliban to one of legitimacy.

The target audience included specific politicians. Leno met with both the Clinton and the Bush administrations, as well as testifying before the U.S. Congress to encourage them toward greater involvement. Business leaders were also specifically targeted. When the energy company UNOCAL planned to build an oil pipeline across Afghanistan, as part of an ongoing campaign by FMF, Leno convinced one of the shareholders to let her take his seat at one of UNOCAL’s meetings, and in the session, she attempted to persuade the company to withdraw its plans. Soon after, it did halt efforts.

Leno also planned several fund-raisers targeting Hollywood celebrities. This served two main purposes in that it provided the Hollywood community an opportunity to add its voices to the campaign and gave them an opportunity to give financial support.

In addition, Leno targeted media reporters, newscasters, and interviewers. Once they became aware of the situation, they were in a position to contribute to the “narrative” and reach a greater audience. After 9/11, the target audiences remained the same, but the goals shifted as the story took a more immediate and intimate turn.

## Justification of Rhetorical Methodology to Analyze Propaganda

Rhetoric is an art form where artisans craft a definable product, an artifact, available to all for consideration, acceptance, or critique. Sonja K. Foss (2004, pp. 4–6) defines rhetoric as “the human use of symbols” in an effort to communicate and possibly to persuade others toward change. Rhetoric crosses many paths of study: semiotics, semantics, linguistics, performance, literature, oratory, and more. Any study of the symbols used in the act of propaganda can be enriched by a critical analysis steeped in the theories and perspectives offered by the rhetorical critical tradition. Rhetors seek, first of all, to construct a group of people of shared values and contextualities who are willing to be inspired into action based on the realities communicated in the speech act. Rhetorical critics attempt to understand and identify the realities that are created by the speaker, the audience, and the context within which the symbolic transaction takes place. Rhetorical critics then relate to their readers the total effect of the symbolic framing that exists within the world of the whole speech act. Words are “symbolic acts” of power (Burke, 1945/1969, pp. 38–42; Burke, 1989, pp. 77–85) that may lead us to act out in physical actions that may lead to further symbolic acts. To study important rhetors, particularly ones as visible as Leno in the feminist movement, and examine their language is not only useful but also compelling. The speech act is an artifact that, when properly contextualized, can shed light on potential effective language-based systems of persuasion and propaganda.

The particular rhetorical methodology used in this study is narrative criticism. Foss (2004) summons dramatic structure when she states that “a narrative generally is recognized to be a way of ordering and presenting a view of the world through a description of a situation involving characters, actions, and settings” (p. 400). She goes on to explain, “A narrative, as a frame upon experience, functions as an argument to view and understand the world in a particular way, and by analyzing that narrative, the critic can understand the argument being made and the likelihood that it will be successful in gaining adherence for the perspective it presents” (p. 400). Furthermore, narrative criticism can provide “the opportunity to analyze not simply the content of a worldview [such as pentadic criticism or fantasy-theme], but the form and structure of that worldview” (p. 401).

Walter Fisher (1987) sees the narrative paradigm as being the way humans “establish a meaningful life-world” (p. 62). For him, the hearers of stories are affected on a number of important levels simultaneously. The structure of the story appeals to a listener’s sense of reason, emotion, intellect, imagination,



sense of truth, and assessment of value (p. 75). Because of this multiple effect and because of the ubiquitous presence of storytelling throughout human history, Fisher believes that use of the narrative is a “reliable, trustworthy, and desirable guide to belief and action” (p. 95). If we accept Fisher’s understanding of narrative potency, it is clear to see the potential benefits offered to propagandists who structure their message into a story. The narrative structure is a ready-made device for delivering a message that is partly accepted simply because of its familiar form. This allows the propagandist to use strategic ellipses (remaining silent on issues that might complicate and thereby dissuade acceptance) and to communicate with simplicity in a limited amount of time. There seems to be a clear justification for using narrative rhetorical analysis when examining the story artifacts of propagandists. This method allows us to more carefully examine the strategies employed by the rhetor, and it allows the critic a greater opportunity to posit the effects of those strategies on the intended audience as it considers the text of the narrative, its context, method of dissemination, and impact.

Stewart, Smith, and Denton (2001, pp. 249–272) explained that argument from a narrative vision is a compelling persuasive structure used by social movements. In fact, they stated, “Finally, because narratives help us to interpret events, and because events help us to validate our choice of narrative, political history is a series of struggles for narrative dominance” (p. 270). Narratives are fluid and exist primarily among an exchange of adaptive strategies played out on and determined by popular media’s reaction/construction of dramatic events around the stories of Mavis Leno, and those stories are, in turn, used by her as a form of white propaganda. White propaganda is defined by Jowett and O’Donnell (1999) as coming “from a source that is identified correctly, and the information in the message tends to be accurate” (p. 12), as opposed to black propaganda, which is “credited to a false source and spreads lies, fabrications, and deceptions” (p. 13). Leno engages in a white propaganda in an attempt to move a broad audience toward a recognition of the tragic human drama developing in Afghanistan.

## Media Utilization Techniques

Mavis Leno, married to television personality and star Jay Leno, knew how to use the resources of glamour and drama of Hollywood, and she immediately called on these as strategies to use for her compelling mission to help the women of Afghanistan. She had never used them before but felt it necessary to do so in this situation. She explained in our second interview,

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It took a long time for me to stop focusing on what I felt I was inadequate at, which when I began the traditional thing to do something about a human rights abuse would be to go to get money in the form of grants and to go to the serious press; get the issue into *Time*, blah, blah, blah . . . But I think that it is not uncommon for women to focus on what they don't know rather than what they do know because this is exactly what I was doing. And one day, the dime dropped, I realized, "Wait a minute, I don't know anything about these things, but I do know everything about how you make something famous in Hollywood." (M. N. Leno, personal communication, January 15, 2004)

The strategic use of celebrity power is of course not unique to FMF. It is useful to examine the effectiveness and power of celebrities within various persuasion and propaganda campaigns because it points to a greater understanding of the propagandist, the audience, and the reality surrounding the two.

It all began when Leno decided to use the strengths she had. She contacted her husband's publicists and asked them to help her plan two press conferences, one in New York (October 21, 1998) and one in Los Angeles (October 22, 1998), where she would announce that she and her husband were donating \$100,000 to the cause. She claimed that this was the only way she knew to put an immediate end to the "silence" surrounding the plight of Afghan women. Once Mavis and Jay Leno held the press conferences, holding up a large billboard check with \$100,000 written on it, there was indeed an immediate reaction by the popular media. They began to regularly appear together on local news shows, and within a day of the press conferences, they were invited on *Larry King Live* while other popular entertainment shows soon had them as guests.

The first media attention (October 22, 1998) came immediately after the Lenos held their press conference. The second cluster of media focus (March 29, 1999) came immediately before and after a Hollywood fund-raiser that Mavis Leno created to involve stars in the cause. The crafting of this fund-raiser became part of the narrative. Linda Bloodworth Thomason, a television producer and creator of *Designing Women* and *Evening Shade*, strategically created the event. She had, along with her husband, been responsible for producing two inaugural celebrations for President Bill Clinton and is perceived as a powerful woman in both Hollywood and Washington, D.C. She came on board to help develop positive press around the fund-raiser with Mavis Leno at the center. "She would choreograph a high profile Hollywood event, marking Mavis Leno's debut as a humanitarian, mover, and shaker" (*CNN Entertainment Weekly*, May 6, 1999). Leno explained in my interview that many agents and publicists are women; thus, when she and Bloodworth called them, they were eager and passionate to help and would ask, "Who do you want to be there?" and then they made it happen (M. N. Leno, personal

communication, January 15, 2004). She believed that Hollywood had as much right to speak as anyone else with the power to do so. She stated in my interview with her,

First of all, I don't know why fame would disenfranchise you. You have as much right to your opinion as any other American and if it's more listened to because you're famous, it's your opinion, why wouldn't you want it to be more listened to? But what I really find hypocritical about it, since it mostly shows up in the news (regular people don't seem to be irritated by it, you know), the people that own the media, the people that own the newspapers, the magazines, the you know, television shows and networks; they don't own them because they're so incredibly well up on current affairs and political interactions. They own them because they're rich. Why is it okay for them to have a hugely disproportionate voice in American and international politics, and not all right for celebrities? (M. N. Leno, personal communication, January 15, 2004)

During both events, a consistent narrative emerged communicating the story of the rich and famous caring for abused and neglected women half a world away. The narrative was forged out of the materials of popular media, fame, and an awful truth.

The third cluster of media events surrounding Mavis Leno's campaign was immediately following the tragic terrorist attacks in New York City on 9/11. Leno explains this time period by stating,

I was in Europe when it happened . . . Suzie Gilligan of FMF and Kathy were calling me every minute, this person wants an article, that person wants an article, "When you get back, would you do this interview?" I swear, as soon as I got back, I had 3 seconds to get over jet lag, because then it was just news, news, news. This was the chance we had been waiting for and we were not going to fluff it if possible. (M. N. Leno, personal communication, January 15, 2004)

Leno explained to me in the second interview that she was in Italy when the terrorist tragedy occurred at the World Trade Center. Once she returned home, the media bombarded her. Suddenly, everyone wanted her to appear on his or her show (M. N. Leno, personal communication, January 15, 2004). This cluster of media events was different from the two before in that it now included news as well as entertainment shows. Leno was invited to appear on *The Today Show*, *CNN News*, *FOX News*, and *Hardball*. Entertainment and news heavyweights in the industry such as Paula Zann, Chris Matthews, Lisa Givvens, and Katie Couric interviewed her. During this period, the story shifted and allowed the inclusion of the arch-villain Al Qaeda terrorist network, which had the effect of moving the narrative closer

to melodrama and, perhaps, caused it to be ultimately subsumed into the larger melodrama—the war on terrorism.

## Special Techniques to Maximize Effect

### *Narrative Prior to 9/11*

Source credibility was initially an issue for Ms. Leno in that she was not well known by her intended audience, and no one considered her to be an expert in the area of international politics, religious extremism, or even basic Islamic traditions. But source credibility is thought to be a major contributing factor to the overall effectiveness of the propaganda event (Jowett & O'Donnell, 1999, p. 291). To compensate for the lack of initial source credibility, the narrative was constructed by Leno and others to draw upon the Hollywood star power of her husband, Jay Leno. I asked her if she felt it was a contradiction to use the star power of her husband for a feminist cause, and she replied,

In this situation, he's doing it for me, and you know, when I said that the first thing you need to do, if you do this kind of thing, is get your ego out of it. That would be about my ego. Do I look like a hypocrite? Do I look like . . . ? What is the biggest thing I could bring to the table for these women to get their situation known to the world and be a voice for the people whose voice has been stolen? My husband's fame. If I am not willing to use it because people might think I was being less than a feminist, then my ego isn't out of it enough, is it? (M. N. Leno, personal communication, August 2, 2001)

The Lenos understood that once they agreed to be interviewed together, they would be giving up valued privacy to their personal lives, but according to Leno, they were willing to do so to help relieve the plight of Afghan women, and she knew that she lacked the credibility of star power to accomplish her goal (M. N. Leno, personal communication, August 2, 2001). Later, when media accounts focused on the Hollywood fund-raiser, referential source credibility was established when segments portrayed other celebrities present at the event. Reports began with comments about the “star-studded event” and “Hollywood turns out tonight” as well as “Big movie stars were out in force tonight to call attention to the plight of the women and girls in Afghanistan” (KCAL, March 29, 1999). A reporter on KCAL stated, “The glitz and glamour of Hollywood is literally a world away from the troubled streets of Afghanistan. But the women of Tinseltown are speaking out for their sisters across the globe” (KCAL, March 29, 1999). Lists of stars present at the event were given (KCAL, *Access Hollywood*, *Entertainment Tonight*,

*E!*, *News Daily*, *CNN Entertainment Weekly*, March 29, 1999). In some of the accounts, interviews occurred with some of the stars, and they consistently communicated agreement with Leno's cause and called attention to her heroism. Juliette Lewis said, "The fact that she's taken on this cause so strongly shows that that's an incredible woman right there" (*Access Hollywood*, March 30, 1999). Lionel Ritchie claimed, "One call from Mavis did it" (*CNN Entertainment Weekly*, May 6, 1999). While *E! News Daily* told the story of the fund-raiser, it had the words continually on the screen, "Mavis Message" (March 29, 1999). In addition, Jay Leno addressed his wife's reluctant heroism when he concluded the fund-raiser by tearfully stating, "I am so proud of her. The only one crying was the guy" (*Access Hollywood*, March 30, 1999). The weight of 1,000 celebrities present at the event, combined with that of her husband's, endowed Leno with a referential credibility all her own and provided a substantial opening between her and her intended mass audience.

Visual symbols of power, also a propaganda technique (Jowett & O'Donnell, 1999, pp. 293–294), were present in the media accounts. In many televised segments, images were shown repetitively of the Lenos attending Hollywood parties and awards ceremonies, attractively dressed in fashionable clothing, getting in and out of limousines, and filmed walking in slow motion, capturing the mystery and splendor of their lives. They were awash in the typical symbols of power, wealth, beauty, and glamour that entertainment television craves.

According to Jowett and O'Donnell (1999), "Messages have greater impact when they are in line with existing opinions, beliefs, and dispositions" (p. 290). Stewart et al. (2001) argue that the use of narrative in persuasive appeal "hinges less on changing beliefs, attitudes, or values than on integrating beliefs and behaviors into a story regarded by the audience as coherent, relevant, compatible, promising, and proper" (p. 250). For audiences, the personal narrative created by the media and Mavis and Jay Leno reinforced American values such as romance, traditional marriage and marriage roles, popularity, and success.

In the personal narrative, Mavis and Jay Leno live a glamorous life in Hollywood and are a happily married couple in a culture where that is unusual. One reporter said they are an "endangered species in Hollywood, a couple happily married for eighteen years in spite of the pressures of wealth and fame" (*Extra*, October 28, 1998). Sometimes, part of the narrative included how they met and fell in love. One reporter said, "They met twenty-two years ago at a L.A. Comedy Club. She was a struggling screenwriter sitting in the audience. Jay was performing and she caught his eye. And the rest is history" (*Extra*, January 16, 1999). When Jay introduced Mavis on

*The Tonight Show*, he stated, "My next guest, my best friend in the whole world, who I love more than anything" (March 23, 1999). During the show, they discussed how they met, how Jay proposed, and whether Jay was romantic or not. They are a successful, attractive, and wealthy couple who love each other and are living a fairy-tale life. There were several times when after crafting the narrative for the audience, a reporter would conclude, "That's sweet" and "They seem really happy" (*Extra*, March 24, 1999).

Their life appears to be one of romance as well as sexual pleasure. When Jay introduced Mavis on *The Tonight Show*, he stated, "She's the only guest I've slept with." During the interview, he discussed the car they first had sex in and explained that they still have the car and created an entire humorous scenario around the situation (March 23, 1999). Also, after Mavis appeared on *The Tonight Show* for the first time, an *Inside Edition* reporter interviewed the Lenos; Jay commented about what the situation of her appearance on his show had been like for the two of them, and he said, "It's like our first date together" (March 24, 1999). He then went on to make a sexual innuendo about the "first time" when he said, "Like first dates, we didn't know what was going to happen, but we know what is going to happen afterwards" (*Access Hollywood*, March 24, 1999).

Not only did the narrative emphasize Mavis's shyness but also the couple's attempts to be very private about their personal lives until the FMF campaign to help Afghan women. One commentator stated on the entertainment show, *Inside Edition*, "Jay is kind of opening up to us at home, showing us his family and showing us a little bit of himself. Before, he was just trying very hard to entertain, entertain, entertain. Now he's setting back and we're getting to know Jay a little better" (March 24, 1999). Mavis, more than her spouse Jay, values privacy. One reporter explained, "Mavis prefers to keep her private life private, but now is shedding her anonymity for women's rights" (*Extra*, January 16, 1999).

Mavis Leno's narrative before 9/11 perfectly reflected the grand narrative of contemporary fame. Her story was set to the defining attributes of the American mythology where everyone can be young, beautiful, well connected, virtual, and terribly rich. Leno tapped into this narrative context of fame because her story involved money, television, sex, and the titillating thrill of getting to know the Lenos, who were in the past private and mysterious. Her story also contained the essential ingredient of all dramas—conflict (kept at a safe distance), laced with bits of the exotica of a dark and mysterious eastern culture. Taken together, Leno's narrative reflected American fame and, in so doing, appropriated some of its mass potency.

As with anyone wishing to tap into the mass appeal that fame offers, Leno was restricted to performing within a set of constraints. One such constraint

was time. She had to briefly communicate the details of her message and her preferred billboard-like statement “gender apartheid” (*KCET Life and Times Tonight*, November 19, 1998). Whenever she was given an opportunity, she briefly stated that women were allowed equality before the Taliban and that after the Taliban took power, their basic rights were removed, but her message was usually well seasoned with the two-word phrase that alluded to another historical narrative that included elements of a world behind a just cause and success. Usually, she gave the example of women being forced to wear burqas. She concluded several times, “Every other thing that constitutes human life has been stripped from them [the women]” (*KCET Life and Times Tonight*, November 19, 1998). Many times, she would display a burqa as a symbol of repression and point out the piece of one she wore on her clothing as a reminder of the women in Afghanistan (*Howie Mandel Show*, February 10, 1999). Some entertainment shows would show pictures of women wearing burqas in Afghanistan or neighboring Pakistan. The women would be shown walking in slow motion with mysterious yet upbeat music playing in the background (*Extra, Access Hollywood, Inside Edition*, 1998–1999).

When Leno described the situation, she creatively incorporated a strategy commonly used by propagandists; she built her argument on the structure of American group norms and values. According to Jowett and O’Donnell (1999), “Conforming tendencies are also used to create a ‘herd instinct’ in crowds” (p. 293). In one of the first interviews the Lenos gave, on *Larry King Live*, Mavis explained, “This is such a profound egregious violation of human rights, this is so far over the line.” Jay Leno then stated, “As bizarre as this sounds, I don’t want people to think this has anything to do with Muslim or Islamic faith. This is to the Muslim-Islamic faith what the Jerry Springer clan guy is to Christianity” (October 22, 1998). When Larry King interviewed the Lenos, Jay explained, “You see, there is no other side to this issue, I mean, there is no one else saying, ‘Let’s go to the opposition and see how they feel,’ because there is no other side” (October 22, 1998). Several times, he compared the Taliban to Hitler’s power in Germany. He said that no one in America believed people were being exterminated because it seemed too extreme to them. Both Lenos repetitively made the point that the Taliban are isolated from the rest of reasonable human beings, and if the audience is reasonable versus extreme, they too will want to be a part of the group that has nothing to do with the Taliban. Therefore, the audience must get involved and give money, contact Congress, and so on.

Prior to 9/11, reporters and interviewers typically communicated a warm interest in the Lenos’ personal narrative but maintained a distance from the Afghanistan part of the story. Their take on the story was Mavis as reluctant heroine and Jay supporting her cause. One reporter ended the story after the

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Afghan part was told with a dismissive “hmm” and then concluded with an update on Jay being a new columnist for *Popular Mechanic* (*Access Hollywood*, January 27, 1999). Many times after a brief discussion with Leno about Afghanistan, reporters asked her questions about her husband’s comic material, why she has not had children, her travels, and so on. The sad tale of Afghanistan women was far away and did not involve U.S. politics (no pointing fingers at American political leaders) or religion. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, a new chapter was written in the narrative.

### *Narrative After 9/11*

Leno understood the importance of the events on 9/11 to her rhetorical message. In our interview, she stated,

Dealing with the events, I mean, one of the good things that came out of the hideous unspeakable situation obviously was huge visibility for what had happened to these women and for the profoundly villainous nature of the Taliban, which it was hard to actually persuade people prior to that, especially in the first couple of years we got doubted a lot by journalists. All of a sudden, it was a complete turn around. (M.N. Leno, personal communication, January 15, 2004)

Leno understood that a strategic rhetorical response was necessary to maximize the opportunity given to FMF in this situation. In some ways, her message remained the same after 9/11. The story had strong continuity in terms of the polarization between the people of Afghanistan (particularly women) and the Taliban. She stated, “They [the Afghan people] not only don’t side with the Taliban. They hate them, they loathe them, they fear them, and they spend a huge amount of time escaping from them” (*Entertainment Tonight*, September 27, 2001). Here Leno’s purpose was to create identification between the Afghan women and American audiences, so that Americans would want to provide help and safety for these people. Also, her focus on the Taliban was a staple of her message after 9/11 as well as before (KABC, September 27, 2001). Again, this emphasized the freedoms that had been taken away from the Afghan women as well as the idea that the women are the “invisible enemies” of the Taliban (News conference, September 30, 2001).

Source credibility continued to be a key strategy after 9/11—not from referential power, but rather from expertise and authority now granted to Mavis Leno. The narrative constructed after 9/11 had Leno as its central character, and there was only a tangential association with the celebrity of her husband. There were no longer discussions of the Lenos’ marriage, Jay’s comedy routines, or Mavis’s shyness and desire for privacy. No longer did the media



capitalize on the romance of the Lenos, detached from the plight of the women in Afghanistan.

Leno was still identified in most media accounts as the wife of Jay Leno, and there were still several glamorous images of the pair initially shown to establish context, but then full attention was directed at Leno. She was now characterized as a “prophet,” one who knew the evil of the Taliban from almost the beginning, and the media were passionately engaged in her story. For example, the *KTLA Morning News* interviewer began his interview with Leno by saying, “When you came back in ’99 we looked at you like ‘What are you talking about?’ Now we know what you are talking about.” Later, in the interview, he said to her, “Somehow a lot of us are saying that we wished we had listened to you in ’99” (September 26, 2001). Chris Matthews, on *Hardball*, began his interview with Leno by stating, “A couple of years ago I saw you and your husband, Jay, on television, the *Larry King Show*. And you were making a very strong case on this and like most Americans, I said, ‘Of course,’ and ignored it and said, ‘What else is new? That’s terrible but I don’t care.’ Now we care” (October 5, 2001). *Inside Edition* (September 27, 2001) began its show with, “Jay Leno’s wife warned America about the evils of the Taliban. She knew what they were capable of.” Finally, Jay also communicated the idea that Mavis knew and said we must listen to her. When he introduced her visit to his show for the second time, he said, “I’m very proud of my next guest, my wife, Mavis. You know she was very involved in this Taliban thing a couple of years ago and she brought it to my attention, and she met with the president and she met with a lot of people long before people even knew what it was to help the women of Afghanistan, and she is somewhat of an expert on this, as much as anybody in the country, and she’s here to talk to us tonight, my wife, Mavis Leno” (*The Tonight Show*, October 3, 2001).

The media after 9/11 spent much more time crafting the drama of Afghanistan and many times would present this before Mavis was introduced. Reporters were shown in neighboring Pakistan, walking among women in burqas and menacing-looking men. Because of the availability of the film *Beneath the Veil* (2001), images of women being beaten, even killed by the Taliban, were repeatedly shown. These images were juxtaposed with images of people working at the FMF headquarters, images of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, and images of American soldiers driving in Humvees in Afghanistan. Phrases on the screen were repeatedly shown, such as “War on Terrorism” (*FOX News*, *KTLA*, October 4, 2001), “America on Alert” (*KCAL News*, September 2, 2001), and “America’s New War” (*Larry King Live*, September 2, 2001).

The drama became much larger, more menacing, and Americans were becoming a part of its structure. The narrative explained that Leno was a

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prophet among us who warned us of the evil in a far-away place called Afghanistan. She and the other brave individuals at FMF were hard at work on this issue long before we were victimized by the same evil. Now America must go to war and rid the world of the evil in Afghanistan that had come to our own country to commit atrocities. The Taliban as villain was the focal point of what was now taking shape as a melodrama, rather than Jay as the celebrity who was at the heart of the earlier story. Stewart et al. (2001) discuss strategies used by social movements, and one that is particularly effective is Kenneth Burke's rhetoric of polarization, which can include the identification of a devil that creates a common enemy worthy of destruction, therefore providing a source of unification for the audience (Burke, 1969, pp. 161–162). The media, with their passionately intense voices, used a rhetoric of polarization that included the following words to describe the Taliban: *tyrannical, militant, radical, violent, sickening, horrific, vicious, brutal, insane, abominable, and disgraceful* (*Hardball*, October 5, 2001; *Extra*, September 2, 2001; *FOX News With Hannity & Colmes*, October 4, 2001; *CNN News*, September 28, 2001; *Today Show*, October 2, 2001). Leno, too, engaged in this intense and passionate denouncement of the Taliban with words such as *insane, control freaks, ominous, and religious fanatics* (news conference, September 30, 2001; *CNN News*, September 28, 2001; *Today Show*, October 2, 2001).

In the narrative she created with the media, Leno communicated the evil of the Taliban and the urgency needed to remove them so that the women and children would not starve and die. She made a direct link between two villains, the Taliban and Osama bin Laden, when she said, "There's no question in my mind that Osama bin Laden and the Taliban are one and the same" (news conference, September 30, 2001), and she maintained in a different interview, "The only thing about that day [9/11/01], and everything that happened that was not shocking to the point of being almost incomprehensible, was that the Taliban, in the form of Osama bin Laden and his supporters, were direct suspects because there are 8–10 terrorist training camps that we know of in Afghanistan. They've been there right along since they took in bin Laden" (*KTLA Morning News*, September 26, 2001). The audience already has an enemy, Osama bin Laden, and Leno creatively links the villain of the audience with the villain she is denouncing.

Leno also created powerful identification by using metaphor to build her case. According to Foss (2004),

We do not perceive reality and then interpret or give it meaning. Rather, we experience reality through the language by which we describe it; it is whatever we describe it *as*. Metaphor is a basic way by which the process of using

symbols to construct reality occurs. It serves as a structuring principle, focusing on particular aspects of a phenomenon and hiding others; thus, each metaphor produces a different description of the “same” reality. (p. 300)

If an audience accepts this “reality,” the metaphor can then signify specific courses of action for listeners or readers. Not only is metaphor argument, according to Kenneth Burke (1945/1969, pp. 503–504), but it is also a marker delineating the user’s “perspective.” If we take Burke’s position, it then follows that an analysis of the key symbolic constructs used by a given speaker enables the critic to understand point of view and to draw certain conclusions about motive, function, and effectiveness of the propagandist.

Leno maintained often, “They [women of Afghanistan] have been hijacked as surely as those people on the airliners were hijacked,” and “When the Taliban took over, they took away every kind of weapon. Believe me, no one there has a box cutter” (*Larry King Live*, September 26, 2001). She extended the terrorist metaphor to create identification between the United States and the Taliban when she said,

The United States created the Taliban. Obviously we didn’t foresee what would happen. The reason that we owe Afghanistan big time, is that when the Soviets gave up and the Afghanistan people won the war, we just left. We didn’t oversee the peace. The country was semi-annihilated and was sown from end to end with landmines and you now had all these 17-year-old boys who were religious fanatics wandering the country armed to the teeth with nothing to do with themselves. You fill in the blank. What did we think would happen? We really dropped the ball on this one. We created a terrible humanitarian disaster for the people of this country, especially the women, and we created a landmine for ourselves which very sadly exploded in New York. (News conference, September 30, 2001)

So because of the United States’s complicity with the Taliban coming into power, the United States suffered as well as the Afghan people have suffered at the hands of the evil Taliban; both had been “hijacked.” As a result, the United States must rescue the Afghanistan people from the evil that was created by the United States, since the United States was guilty of the existence of the Taliban. Then, in her narrative, “The Taliban will collapse and be forced to release the country. And I do mean release, because the Taliban has essentially hijacked the Afghan people” (*KTLA Morning News*, September 27, 2001). She identified the victimization of Americans and terrorism with the victimization of Afghan women and terrorism. They also could identify the same evil villain and must remove that villain in order that they might live in peace, freedom, and justice. This strategic use of a terrorist metaphor has

the potential to arouse great emotion in the audience considering the context of 9/11.

### Audience Reaction to Various Techniques

There is evidence that there was favorable response by American audiences to Leno's rhetoric because some individuals called in to ask questions on talk shows when Leno wrote a letter in "Dear Abby" (*Entertainment Weekly*, May 1999); according to Eleanor Smeal, president of FMF, the telephone systems crashed at headquarters with responses from readers. Also, there was a very positive and large celebrity audience that attended the Hollywood fund-raiser and lent their support with money, voice, and presence. This was highly publicized in multiple media venues. After 9/11, Leno's narrative kept America focused on the plight of the women and female children in Afghanistan so that no one could forget the importance of including them in any solution found there during and after the war.

### Effects and Evaluation

Kenneth Burke's (1945/1969, p. 42) appropriation of the melodramatic form as a means of critique is interesting in that he finds the hero-against-villain struggle useful in describing perpetual conflict arising from polar symbolic constructs. In this frame, Burke points to a kind of critical blindness that can obscure the exchange of symbols in a communication event when participants engage in reducing their perceptions to melodramatic dimensions. A reading of Burke would suggest that the positions of villain victimizer and heroic avenger—with their attributes of the demonized other, pure self, good and evil intent—tend to define or prescribe future acts. Once the melodrama has taken shape, there is little hope of escaping its terminal velocity.

Prior to the destruction of the World Trade Center Towers, Mavis Leno designed an entry onto the news entertainment platform by casting her story, with the Taliban as villain, the Afghan women as victims, and the good people of the United States as potential heroes. So the media turned their attention to an inside look at a giant celebrity. The tragic melodrama of Afghanistan became an exercise in voyeurism about the home life of a comedian. FMF's story was relegated to a side issue that lacked obvious mass appeal and might even be considered a downer. There was something missing in the melodramatic construct created by Mavis Leno and the FMF, and the story was languishing after its brief time in the spotlight.

Before the attacks on September 11, 2001, Mavis Leno was presented as a celebrity with a cause who traded her husband's fame for a little attention to

suffering women half a world away. After the attacks, she was a prophet who had foretold of the villainous evildoers and the innocent hapless victims. And this time the hero was defined: It was the U.S. military.

The strategies taken by the feminists of the FMF have adapted media-constructed realities by fitting their message into a form most recognizable to producers of popular entertainment. It is perhaps too early to determine whether this adaptive maneuver signals a shift away from traditional forms of feminist social agitation, but the phenomena surrounding the Mavis Leno story suggest that new understandings of feminist power may be merging in a way that complements a tactical choice to use the primordial frame of melodrama in the virtual world of mass entertainment. As Leno explained to me when she was considering what had been the most effective choice looking back at her campaign, "And right now that would be one of the biggest things I would advise anyone trying to spread the word about anything to do. Forget the serious news, go to the popular press" (M. N. Leno, personal communication, January 15, 2004). With Leno and the FMF, there has been a conscious choice to enter a highly crafted narrative into the virtual world of entertainment. Popular entertainers have never shied away from speaking their mind on an issue, but what is new here is the use of the tools of commercial entertainment to communicate a message of counterhegemonic dissent. Leno commented on the effectiveness of this strategy when she told me about the hours after the September attacks. She stated, "And I do think the tremendous visibility we were able to get for this issue, even before 9/11, and then we were able to build on that after 9/11. I think it had some impact on our government's decision to make the restoration of women's civil and human rights in Afghanistan a nonnegotiable part of the new government" (M. N. Leno, personal communication, January 15, 2004).

Foss's (2004) narrative frame here is doubled. There is the frame of the story of oppressed women, and the frame of melodrama necessitated by the commercial nature of the media. Leno was offered a role in the melodrama that emerged out of the events of September 11. She was cast in the story because she was, at the time, producing her own related narrative. Because of the timing, she was able to use the larger melodrama to her advantage, but this involvement in the larger cast soon led to her disappearance from the stage. The media's ever-ravenous appetite for neater and more dramatic stories soon left Afghanistan and moved on to Iraq. But the effect of the Leno propaganda, in the given moment, seems to have been great. The country's familiarity with Islamic fundamentalism and the condition of life for the women within that system was obviously expanded.

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As with using celebrity, using melodrama as a propaganda narrative construct has certainly been a part of public discourse for a very long time. But there is something more interesting about the recent use of the form, as it is here combined with the virtual world of popular entertainment; it seems to point to a new method of dissent, and it has one additional outcome. Mavis Leno was not a victim accusing her oppressor. She was not a hero figure saving the helpless masses. Instead, Mavis Leno placed the treatment of women onto the global stage, using Afghanistan as both real cause and metaphor, and by doing that, she circumvented the normal barriers that would offer resistance to her message. Because she spoke of a foreign melodrama, she could cast the whole world as heroes and thereby create a watershed of support for fair and just treatment of women worldwide. So, in the end, the over-reaching narrative produced propaganda that attempted to align the thoughts of the audience on several fronts: the situation of the oppressed women in Afghanistan, the “war on terror,” and the more general problem of patriarchy. When I asked Leno what she believed to be the difference that she and the FMF made to the plight of the women in Afghanistan, she responded, “Women are always the chip that gets traded off when people are trying to make a deal at the table, when men are trying to make a deal at the table, and I think the difference is, we made this a chip that couldn’t be traded off” (M. N. Leno, personal communication, January 15, 2004).

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