Introduction

In the fall of 2007, Newsweek featured a cover story on marriages between Iraqi citizens and American military personnel that had taken place in the years since the U.S. invasion. The article appeared at a time, opinion polls showed, that American support for the war had reached a new low; calls for a full troop withdrawal were mounting, and the war would soon become a major factor in the presidential campaign. But for the foreseeable future, Americans were “married to Iraq” whether they liked it or not, the title that Newsweek’s editors had given their story. For the cover they chose an arresting and somehow unsettling image. A stunning woman, dark-eyed and olive-skinned, stares gravely at the camera, “a native Iraqi,” Dr. Zena Majeed. The viewer’s eye is pulled to her face, and to the swirling embroidery and beadwork of her purple gown. Her American husband, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Allinger, stands behind her in army dress uniform, gazing soberly ahead. The photograph starkly encodes difference: male and female, military and civilian, light and dark, disciplined and sensual, American and foreign. So too does the article's text: “For all the forces pushing Americans and Iraqis together in this war, . . . even greater ones are driving them apart.” Iraqis and their American liberators were divided by a “chasm” of differences, according to the authors—language, history, politics, religion, and violence. This “abyss of religious and cultural misunderstandings” was “hard to cross,” even for the small handful of intercultural couples who had ventured to marry. The article’s conclusion was a pessimistic one: “Sadly, even as these relationships continue and deepen, so does America’s tragic relationship with Iraq.”

Like a crystal ball, the magazine implied, intercultural marriages can be read to “tell us” the meaning of the war—what we are doing in Iraq and what might come of our troubled relationship to that nation. Whether they realized it or not, the Newsweek writers and editors were engaged in a discursive practice with a long history.

In each of the major wars of the last century—World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War—overseas military service placed U.S.
military personnel in sustained contact with young women of both allied and enemy nations. In each of these wars, U.S. soldiers returned home with thousands of foreign-born wives and children. Tens of thousands of allied war brides were officially recognized as a new category of immigrant, their numbers peaking in the aftermath of World War II but continuing through the Cold War era. Thousands of former “enemy” women—Germans, Italians, and Japanese—also met and married U.S. soldiers under conditions of post-war occupation. In undertaking responsibility for the foreign wives brought home by American servicemen, the state recognized the war bride as a consequence, welcome or not, of U.S. foreign military commitments.

A central contention of this book is that such intercultural relationships have served an important function in U.S. history: war bride marriages are a multifaceted prism through which Americans have sought to make meaning on a popular level of their relationships with other countries. It is the unique way that the war bride blends gender, sexuality, race, nationalism, and foreign relations that makes these marriages such a rich field of interpretation. My own work is part of an evolving historical discourse in global women’s studies that explores how women and women’s sexuality have been mobilized in the context of war, and especially postwar eras, as a means to enact social ends such as national purification, revenge, or social healing—processes that usually, though not invariably, oppress or stigmatize women.3 By making the uses and constructions of gender a topic of inquiry within the history of foreign relations, scholars have broadened and even reconceptualized the field.4 The study of war brides belongs to that effort.

Those who have considered war brides in the past have been drawn to their stories for very different reasons. One is the impulse to humanize or personalize war. Love in a war zone speaks to many people of the remarkable human capacity to choose life even in the midst of death and chaos. Novelist John Horne Burns, an intelligence officer in the Mediterranean theater during World War II, articulated this view in his best-selling novel of 1947, *The Gallery*: “In a war one has to love, if only to assert that he’s very much alive in the face of destruction. Whoever has loved in wartime takes part in a passionate reaffirmation of his life.” It is revealing that the authors of a major study of World War II brides chose this passage from Burns as the epigraph to their work.3 Love across national boundaries, love that is capable of overcoming profound obstacles or deep differences, is for many a special sign of hope; it intimates the possibility of human reconciliation and mutual understanding. This perspective is behind much of the writing by war brides
and those who identify closely with them, often war bride daughters. Such personal accounts come from a second and equally strong impulse. Telling war bride stories is a form of grassroots women’s history—a collective effort to gather and disseminate war bride testimony that has helped to make this study possible. Authors and editors of these projects express a desire to add women’s voices to the history of war, attending to a previously neglected dimension of war experience. While the practice of telling individual stories can be a powerful corrective to standard histories of war, introducing war’s human side, it also runs the risk of atomizing that history or, worse, even sentimentalizing it.

Feminist theory provides a contrasting framework for thinking about war brides. The exchange of women across boundaries of tribe or nation is an ancient human practice, carried out to resolve boundary disputes, build political alliances, or denote the close of warfare between groups. For all these reasons, as Cynthia Enloe has shown, “marriage has . . . been treated as serious business by the makers of foreign policy.” The bride is the “spoil of war” that goes to the victor, an assertion of power over rival males that upholds patriarchy on many levels. In British North America, for example, marriages between male European trappers and Indian women were “a means of cementing alliances on a frontier that still eluded secure imperial control.” Furthermore, such a marriage “gave a white man a sense that he was superior, that he was saving a woman from the deplorable condition of savagery.” This belief “bolstered” white men’s sense of the “moral rightness” of the colonial enterprise.7 In a modern context, the American soldier who meets and marries a local woman in a military base community overseas might be seen to represent, in one of its forms, the power that the United States asserts over foreign lands and people, especially over women. This perspective has provided a theoretical underpinning to the important work of feminist activists around the globe who connect U.S. overseas military bases with the subjugation of women, and with social problems such as trafficking, AIDS, and military prostitution.8

An alternative point of entry for considering war brides is the history of the term itself. Viewing war brides across the dimension of time, one can begin to see the term’s dynamic quality as well as its complexity. The earliest identifiable use of the phrase to denote an intercultural marriage in the context of U.S. military operations comes from the Mexican border conflict of 1914.9 But in fact, the phenomenon of soldier marriage in foreign war can be traced back to the first overseas military expeditions of the United States in Cuba and the Philippines. No one thought to call these intercultural relationships “war bride marriages” or regarded them as a unique category of matri-
mony. Their existence is revealed only incidentally, as an artifact of military occupation. In Cuba, where Americans carried out their first experiments in the management of civil affairs in a colonial context, military government was established on a regional or “departmental” basis. One of the tasks assigned to the sanitary affairs officer was to make an accounting of births, deaths, and marriages in his region of command. With American efficiency and attention to detail, several of these officers recorded the marriage statistics in their department broken down into racial and national categories. It is from these records that we learn that one “Negro” and twenty-one white Americans married Cuban women between May 1899 and April 1900. Nothing more is known about these couples, but these women are likely to have been the nation’s first identifiable foreign war brides.

“War bride” had a different meaning entirely at the start of World War I—the mirror image of its later connotation. The phrase was used to describe an American wife, usually a newlywed, waiting chastely at home for the return of her soldier, like an American Penelope. By marrying her husband on the eve of his departure for war, she demonstrated her emotional courage and her loyalty to her husband as well as the nation. Waiting was a form of women’s war work in this construction, crucial to men’s morale. Later generations would wring their hands over such impetuous “gangplank marriages”—unions of young men and young women contracted in the feverish atmosphere of war mobilization—but in World War I, the American war bride stood as a model of patriotic womanhood.

This meaning of the term lingered into the 1920s (in an American stage play, for example, and even a popular Yiddish musical of the postwar years). But it was overtaken, and soon overwhelmed, by a new usage that surfaced early in 1919. The demobilization of the American Expeditionary Force at the close of World War I gave rise to the war bride as a new category of female immigrant. “War bride” now referred to the foreign wives that doughboys had taken by the thousands while serving overseas, “the petite chic demoiselles, ever ready . . . to whisper a ’je t’aime’ to a strapping Yankee come over to drive away the Hun.” The army was responsible for formulating the term in its new meaning and defining its initial parameters. By the time that Americans first encountered this new species of American wife in the flood of newspaper and magazine stories that accompanied the women’s arrival, war brides had already begun to acquire some of the material privileges that would later characterize their position. As the preceding quote suggests, they had acquired as well the sexualized aura and the imprint of difference that would surround them for decades to come in American popular understanding and public debate.
By the end of World War II, “war bride” was a relatively privileged category of immigration accompanied by a number of important features, including a non-quota immigration status, expedited naturalization, room, board, and medical care under military auspices in the period before departure, free transport en route to the United States, and, within the United States, free transport to the husband’s city of residence. The foreign wife earned this special status, of course, not through her own initiative or volition but by virtue of being selected by an American serviceman. While the military had the primary role in developing policies that defined the category of war bride, other institutions also made key contributions. The National American Red Cross, an important player across this history, worked closely with the military, sometimes in parallel and sometimes at odds with it, to shape the outlines of who and what constituted a war bride. Congress also took part. A series of war bride bills passed in the late 1940s and early 1950s delineated the rights that attached to the foreign wives of soldiers and outlined the limitations of those rights. Once established, the term took on a life of its own, and it turned out to be flexible, used, for instance, to embrace and rehabilitate former enemies in Germany through military marriages during the early years of the Cold War. It was adaptable as well by some women and couples as a tool for family reunification and economic survival—women from Eastern Europe and Italy, for example, who were married prior to war and utilized the military’s policy of providing free transportation for soldiers’ wives to unite immigrant families long separated by war and migration. But war bride was also a contested status, sought by and denied to many husbands and wives in intercultural war marriages, most notably, African American GIs with white European wives, and white and black GIs with Japanese wives or fiancées.

This book traces the rise, and then the demise, of the war bride over the course of the twentieth century, both as a special category of female immigrant and as a cultural construction. The history of war brides consists of at least two stories, separate but intertwined, and traced here in alternating chapters. The first, centered overseas, analyzes the development of intercultural marriage against the backdrop of war and the evolution of army policy in regard to marriage. Military policies, the book shows, played a crucial role in shaping the wartime and postwar fabric of gender and sexual relations. Soldier marriage never took place anywhere in a vacuum. Instead, it existed in a matrix of warfront interaction between American soldiers and local women that encompassed courtship and dating, consensual and coerced.
sexual intercourse, informal and commercial prostitution, and sexual assault and the transmission of sexual disease. Managing relationships between soldiers and women—“fraternization” in military parlance—became a major concern of the U.S. military in every theater of war. It was a source of friction with allied leaders and a cause of conflict with local communities. The “problem” of marriage, alongside the related problems of bigamy, desertion, and extramarital pregnancy, demanded action from military officials. The specific decisions that they made at different moments and in different places had unforeseen and often profound ramifications for women, both foreign-born and U.S.-born, who married or wished to marry American servicemen.

One of the most important factors in the structuring of soldier marriage has been race. The state’s repression and condemnation of interracial relationships was a feature of war bride marriage for much of the century. In World War I, for instance, U.S. military and civilian authorities took a paternalistic stance toward white soldiers, determined to “protect” them from sexually promiscuous foreign women. But this attitude was reversed in the case of “colored troops,” as military officials warned allies of the sexual danger that African American servicemen allegedly posed to the white women of other nations. By World War II, racial ideology in the United States had begun to face resistance by activists of color and their white allies, who challenged racial segregation in the military and at home, as well as “oriental exclusion” in immigration policy. Yet despite the state of flux in race relations in the 1940s and 1950s, the U.S. government, with the urging of the armed services, maintained its segregationist policies in soldier marriage. These included initially excluding Asian women from the GI Brides Act and denying the marriage requests of black and white interracial couples on the grounds that “miscegenous unions” were illegal in many U.S. states. Deeply held views about racial inferiors and superiors continued to underlie American military engagement in the Cold War. The legacy of biracial relationships in the Vietnam War, as it involved Vietnamese women, American men, and their “Amerasian” children, is one further indication of the centrality of race in analyzing gender relationships in wartime and postwar periods.

The second story, one set primarily in the United States, revolves around the American response to war brides as immigrants and as soldiers’ wives. Anyone fascinated by war brides soon finds him- or herself in good historical company. Decade after decade, intercultural war marriages were scrutinized by journalists, fiction writers and Hollywood filmmakers, social workers and marriage counselors, psychologists and sociologists, courts and juries, politi-
cal leaders and the public as they struggled to understand the consequences of “international intercourse” for their nation. In time I came to see that this discussion about war brides was at the heart of the study. In each period, the discourse was shaped by the contemporary concerns of foreign, domestic, and immigration policy and gender relations. This was apparent, for example, following World War I, when the prevailing xenophobia and nationalism of the United States were reflected in a pronounced hostility to European wives. War brides in the 1920s were stigmatized as prostitutes or “gold diggers,” women who had taken advantage of innocent American “boys.” After World War II, in contrast, soldiers’ marriages were linked to the nation’s newfound global leadership. As U.S. leaders courted relationships across the globe, war brides were a reassurance of the nation’s ability to woo and win the admiration and loyalty of foreign others in the context of the emerging Cold War. In this sense, war bride marriages have had both a cultural and a political function, helping Americans to construct and comprehend their relationships with foreign countries and with foreign newcomers to the United States as these questions were redefined across the century.

Most important, perhaps, the story of war brides is embedded in the comparative history of postwars, an important but largely neglected dimension of the social and cultural history of the twentieth-century United States. War disrupts and disorders relationships, communities, landscapes, bodies, structures of power, and even systems of meaning. Much of the “reconstruction” work that societies undertake in postwar eras, I would argue, relates to the restoration or renegotiation of this intangible social, emotional, and cultural infrastructure. War brides have been one vehicle for reckoning with war and its consequences, though never in a one-dimensional way. Consider the trope of disease and healing that has been central to the historical debate about war brides. Postwar anxieties about the nation’s integrity and security have been projected onto war brides, seen concretely, for example, in the long-standing view of the women as bearers of infectious or sexual diseases, and, metaphorically, of the women as parasites, leaching vigor from the national body. This view surfaced most acutely after World War I, when the “foreignness” of French brides converged with anti-immigrant sentiment. At other historical moments, Americans have looked to war brides as an aid in the recuperation of the nation’s homecoming soldiers, men sometimes broken emotionally or physically and often seen as threatening to the social order. After World War II, for example, Americans turned to white, English-speaking war brides to help recover the balance of power in gender relations disrupted by the war. When American women have been rebuked in postwar moments for
excessive independence, materialism, and love of luxury, or for overreaching expectations of American men and marriage, foreign brides have frequently been held out as model wives or partners, happily satisfied with whatever their veteran-husbands could offer them and more than willing to proffer them leadership in their family lives. As this suggests, the discourse about war brides has also been about proper American manhood and men’s relationships with women—and, by extension, about the maturity, responsibility, and leadership of the nation in its relations with other countries.

A final unifying focus of the book is the social and subjective experience of women who became war brides. Most men and women in intercultural marriages returned from war, started families, and built lives in the United States. Some of these marriages were tragic mistakes, deeply regretted by one or both parties, but many more seemed to provide companionship and emotional satisfaction, a measure of security and financial stability, or sometimes all of these. In this sense, war bride marriages were much like other postwar American marriages, and not the exotic or aberrant relationships that so interested reporters and the public. War brides’ personal narratives and oral histories are an intriguing counterpart and sometimes counterpoint to the stories constructed about them.15 Evidence from across the study, for instance, indicates that American soldiers were frequently attracted to foreign girlfriends or wives for their “old-fashioned” or “feminine” qualities, for their difference from American women. Yet in their self-narration, women often frame their decision to go out with Americans in contrasting terms, as a defiance of conventional gender roles and an embrace of American-style personal freedoms. War brides over time have used narrative to construct a complex and even contradictory identity, one that blends elements of autonomy (from family and patriarchal control) with themes of dependence (on American husbands and/or the U.S. government). Giving voice to their stories helps to uncover further dimensions of war experience from the perspective of women. It allows us to probe the inner, emotional life of men and women in relationships, in wartime and beyond, and to examine the interplay between personal and public meaning in the construction of identity.

The ending of the book traces both continuity and significant change in soldiers’ overseas marriage from the Cold War forward. In the aftermath of the Korean War, war bride marriage as amicable “international intercourse” was no longer a useful metaphor for interpreting the morass of foreign relations, global ambitions, and wrenching self-doubt that came to characterize U.S. foreign policy. With the opening of permanent U.S. bases throughout Europe and Asia, the overseas marriage of U.S. personnel became a way of
life within the military. So too did the sprawling “camptowns” that provided sex and other R & R services to American troops in South Korea, the Philippines, Okinawa, Vietnam, Thailand, and elsewhere. When intercultural marriages occurred in these contexts, as they did by the tens of thousands over the Cold War decades, Americans reached back to an earlier historical tradition, stigmatizing these foreign and nonwhite wives as prostitutes and economic “parasites,” an attitude intensified by American racism. The privileges attached to war bride marriage were quietly withdrawn as the faces of brides came more fully to reflect the global reach of U.S. foreign policy. Equally important for the demise of the war bride was the nature of U.S. military engagement during the Cold War. As “withdrawal” replaced triumph in these Cold War conflicts—wars that lacked not just victory but even conclusion—the political and cultural outlines of postwar reconstruction necessarily shifted. There were no happy endings here. The dynamic can be seen most clearly in Vietnam. U.S. leaders and cultural producers had little interest in highlighting Vietnamese-American marriage as a resolution to the nation’s greatest foreign-policy debacle of the twentieth century—although, ironically, the patterns of intercultural marriage in the Vietnam War in many ways paralleled those of earlier wars and earlier waves of postwar “war brides.”

In the end, this book tells a story of deep and continuing uneasiness with internationalism on the part of Americans. This uneasiness has grown alongside our growing international involvements—those “entangling alliances” that the first president famously warned against so early in the nation’s history. The study of war brides across the twentieth century reveals the multiple ways that this unease was connected with and expressed through relationships of gender.