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Images of Masculinity in U.S. Conservative Politics

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DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Obrazy Maskulinity v Konzervativní Politice Spojených Států

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I declare that I have elaborated the Bachelor's/Master's thesis or doctoral dissertation entitled

Images of Masculinity in U.S. Conservative Politics

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Abstract

The following thesis is a reflection on the presentation of masculinity in political portraiture and its connection to political power in the United States. This essay aims to connect the earliest forms of gender segregated representational artwork to the presidency of Donald Trump with an emphasis on social psychological theories. I will explore the role of masculinity in monarchical portraiture as it evolved in Europe with a focus on England as the predecessor of the United States. I will then explore the mythology of the American Frontier and the artists who invented the common image of the cowboy which I argue is the quintessential model of American masculinity. Though the frontier myth was generally adopted by more progressive candidates in early American history, by the time Ronald Reagan was running for president in 1980 it had shifted sharply to the political Right where it has remained ever since. Finally, I'll conclude by discussing the ways in which Donald Trump's unique brand of masculine bravado has so effectively captured the hearts and minds of his base of aggrieved White men in the wake of progressive gains made under the Obama administration.

Abstrakt

Následující práce je zamýšlením nad prezentací maskulinity v politickém portrétu a nad jejím propojením s politickou mocí ve Spojených státech. Cílem této eseje je propojit nejstarší formy genderově segregované reprezentativní umělecké tvorby s prezidentstvím Donalda Trumpa s důrazem na sociálně psychologické teorie. Budu zkoumat roli maskulinity v panovnickém portrétu, jak se vyvíjel v Evropě se zaměřením na Anglii jako předchůdkyni Spojených států. Poté se budu zabývat mytologií amerického pohraničí a umělci, kteří vytvořili typický obraz kovboje, o němž tvrdím, že je kvintesenčním modelem americké maskulinity. Ačkoli byl v raných amerických dějinách mýtus hranice obecně přijímán progresivnějšími kandidáty, v době, kdy se Ronald Reagan ucházel o prezidentský úřad, se prudce posunul k politické pravici, kde zůstal dodnes. Na závěr se budu zabývat způsoby, jakými jedinečná značka mužské sílckosti Donalda Trumpa tak účinně uchvátila srdce a mysl jeho základny roztrpčených bílých mužů v důsledku progresivních úspěchů dosažených za Obamovy vlády.

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Introduction

“the construction of a masculine identity is a nostalgic formation, always missing, lost, or about to be lost, its ideal form located in a past that advances with each generation in order to recede just beyond its grasp” - Judith Butler

In a speech in October of 2021, United States Representative, Madison Cawthorn from North Carolina made international headlines when he addressed a crowd with these words,

“Our culture today is trying to completely de-masculate all of the young men in our culture...So I'm telling you, all of you moms here, the people I said are the most vicious in our movement, if you are raising a young man, please raise them to be a monster.”¹

This perfect sound bite was met with a roar of applause from the audience of far right supporters eager to see Donald Trump's allies retake control of the U.S. government after Trump's defeat in the 2020 election. When he said “monster” Cawthorn was imploring the mothers in his audience to raise men who conform to a “traditional” ideal of masculinity, a version of manhood that revolves around domination, self-sufficiency, and aggression. The speech fits a pattern of messaging that, prior to Barack Obama's election, would have only been normal in far Right fringe groups. This kind of rhetoric has become the standard in the post Trump era.

The United States has a long history with masculinity and politics that stems from the near mythological spirit of frontierism, a fierce military, and a hyper conservative and patriarchal religious foundation. But in the wake of the #MeToo movement in 2015, Conservative America became obsessed with protecting the status quo of masculinity and men's place in the world. In particular, the presidency of Donald Trump has been fixated on a message of righteously taking back something that was lost. While the alt-right rarely says directly that the election of Barack Obama is the inception point of their grievance, there is ample psychosocial data that shows a connection between White supremacy and masculinity.

In tracing the history of masculine political imagery through more than a century it has become clear that the evolution of masculine identification is defined by a series of reactions to

¹ [Jesse Dolemore]. (2021, October 19). *Madison Cawthorn Tells Parents to RAISE THEIR SONS TO BE MONSTERS!!!* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4d9JVkBL-xw>

gains made by women and non-White minorities in Western countries. The fragility of masculinity is far older than the current political conversation would lead one to believe and the reaction to perceived threats might be the defining feature of masculinity today. The tenuous nature of masculinity as a status that one earns and fears losing has been instrumental to politicians who play on that insecurity and make promises to keep a privileged status intact. “Scholars and analysts have for decades cited observational and anecdotal evidence that masculine anxiety, and the resulting need to demonstrate masculine prowess, runs deep in American politics—from contributing to the expansion of the Vietnam war, to influencing perceptions of male electability, to guiding strategists’ notions of ‘effective’ political campaigning” (DiMuccio & Knowles 2019, p. 25)

Furthermore, the Republican Party has gone to great lengths to identify itself as the party of masculinity and been quite successful at catering their platform to men, “Specifically, research since the 1960s has consistently found that women are more likely than men to identify and vote Democratic, identify as liberal, and support social-welfare policies. Men, in contrast, are more likely than women to identify and vote Republican, identify as conservative, and support use-of-force policies”. (DiMuccio & Knowles 2019, p. 25)

This has played out in mass media in a multitude of ways. Campaigning presidents have, for decades, donned a cowboy hat for photo-ops as a shorthand for their American authenticity, to telegraph their connection to the frontier spirit and identify themselves with the common man. The sword was ever present in portraits of politicians until the gun took its place and American politicians really, really love their guns. In the 21st Century digital marketing has made it possible for nearly anyone to find an audience, promote an opinion, and distribute it to the masses without any of the barriers found in traditional media and this has led to a wealth of visual media that plays to today’s content hungry and attention deficient populace.

In masculinity rhetoric overall there is a sense of looking backwards to the past as a way to move forward. There is a fixation with restoring more traditionally accepted and conventional gender roles as a way of creating order in a time when the future seems uncertain. In this thesis I will discuss the ways imagery is used in different media to portray a specific, exclusive, and un-evolving form of masculinity that asserts its superiority by subordinating women, “unmasculine” men, and non-White minorities to maintain power.

A Brief History of Gender Representation in Art

For nearly as long as humans have been making self-representative images, we've been depicting men and women in separate spheres with specific symbols that reinforce the responsibilities, expectations, and identities of each sex. The earliest carvings of women, like the very famous "Venus of Willendorf", exaggerated the sexual characteristics of the female form with her large breasts, hips and vulva. Interpretation of this figurine has varied widely with some believing it to be a reverent image of a goddess of fertility while others see one of the earliest examples of the male gaze that reduces the woman to her reproductive features most desired by men². As the human species transitioned from a nomadic lifestyle to a sedentary and agrarian one, the division of gendered spheres deepened. More permanent residences lead to an increase in birth rates and a corresponding rise in women's responsibilities as mothers. The demands of mothering multiple children kept women increasingly in the home and cemented the domestic sphere as the realm of women and domestic work as feminine work. Men on the other hand focused more on big game hunting, construction, and war - the foundation of the masculine.



Figure 1.1

² Jablonka, I. (2019). "A HISTORY OF MASCULINITY From Patriarchy to Gender Justice " Excerpt From *A History of Masculinity*. Penguin Random House UK.

In his book, *A History of Masculinity*, Ivan Jablonka writes, “In the Neolithic as in the Paleolithic period, it is difficult to distinguish between a tool and an arm, or between a hunting weapon and an instrument of war. As far as we can tell, masculinity incorporated the use and symbolism of violence from early on.” (p. 25) Around 1700 BCE, technology and craftsmanship had advanced enough to begin the manufacture of weapons like swords and daggers - the first tools whose only function was to kill. The sword was, with very few exceptions, the property of men and the association between men, the sword, and masculinity continues even today. The rare occasions that women have been depicted with weapons of war (figure 1.2) is a good reminder that images of masculinity do not always equate to images of men. Masculinity is a social construction of behaviors and women are as capable of embodying masculinity as men are, they are just not granted equal access to its privileges.



Figure 1.2



Figure 1.3

In the developed civilizations that were foundational to modern Western civilizations the domestic isolation of women left matters of leadership, administration, politics and religion to men. Therefore the evolution of religion moved slowly but surely in the direction of patriarchy. Goddesses became increasingly subordinate to gods and more and more cultures centered their religious hierarchies around a single ruling male god that ruled over all others, “Enlil in Mesopotamia, Baal in the Levant, Tarhuna among the Hittites, Viracocha among the Incas, Zeus in Greece, Jupiter in Rome, Taranis in the Celtic world, Thor for the Vikings. Feminine divinities were now relegated to the rank of spouses or sisters.” (Jablonka 2019, p. 42) This was mirrored in civil society as more and more political power was centered around one man who

increasingly held absolute power over vast territories and people. The Egyptian Pyramids themselves can be seen as a depiction of this top down society with all areas of life centering around a single point of domination at the top. One can logically see how an increasingly monotheistic and patriarchal religion led men to increasingly see themselves as gods with a divine right to rule over others. Louis XIV of France was even bold enough to label himself The Sun King because all existence revolved around him as the planets revolve around the sun.³ Echoes of despotism continue today. During the Trump presidency the Pew Research Center found that 27% of Americans believed the election of Donald Trump was part of God's plan.⁴ In general in American politics today it would be a grave mistake for a politician, particularly of the Republican Party, to not end a speech with the phrase, "God bless America (or Texas)".

By the mid 17th Century the divisions between men and women in society had deepened along with the division of class. Monarchical portraiture in the mid 17th century showed a continued belief in strict division between the sexes. For kings, manliness was everything and there was a growing rejection of anything perceived as belonging to the realm of women. In Henry VIII's time, masculinity was communicated through the physique as much as anything else. "Broad shoulders were said to 'declare that man to be strong', and 'the backe large, strong, well brawned, & boned, declare a manly nature: & contrarye, a feminine nature'". (Doran 2018, p.203)

In figures 1.4 and 1.5 below, Henry VIII's body is proportioned as unnaturally as Barbie's would be in the 20th century. In his half length portrait his enormous shoulders touch one end of the frame to the other, his significant arms of course clutching a dagger and a horn to show he is equally lethal to men and beasts. His beard and hat were also carefully chosen to express his virality and hide his weakness - in this case his baldness. "grosse, bristled and shorte hair" denoted strength and boldness, while thin hair signified fearfulness and indicated 'an effeminate minde for the lacke of blood'. (Doran 2018, p. 203) The beard present in Henry VIII's portraits was worn to prove his virility as science of the time said the heat of semen within the body was the cause of beard growth.

Behind the scenes of these portraits lies further evidence of the fixation with patriarchal leadership and the precise expression of masculinity by kings. Manuals for princes at the time carefully detailed how a king should speak, dress, manicure himself, what activities were

³ *The Sun King* - Google Arts & Culture. (n.d.). Google Arts & Culture.

<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/the-sun-king-musee-de-l-armee/HQWxVK3QbG1gdw?hl=en>

⁴ (2020, March 12). *White Evangelicals See Trump as Fighting for Their Beliefs, Though Many Have Mixed Feelings About His Personal Conduct*. Pew Research Center.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2020/03/12/white-evangelicals-see-trump-as-fighting-for-their-beliefs-though-many-have-mixed-feelings-about-his-personal-conduct/>

deemed appropriate, and which virtues were becoming of men versus those for women. A persistent fear of appearing “womanish” runs throughout these manuals and popular sentiment at the time said that if the king were to fail to uphold the ideals of manhood he could risk “infect[ing] the whole state with effeminacy and disorder.” (Doran 2018, p. 205) In fact, war was seen as vital to maintaining the masculine image of the nation because “too long periods of peace would allow effeminacy and moral decay to enter the body politic” (Doran 2018, p. 206).

Not all of the masculinity performances were about brawn however. The princely manuals also made clear that reason and logic were expected of male leaders. To be overly masculine would be to give in to animalistic and brutish impulses. This was still framed within a misogynistic context however because “reason was perceived as dominant in men, while unrestrained passions were viewed as a characteristic of women and boys, these two virtues were most strongly associated with manhood” (Doran 2018, p. 204). Women’s “unrestrained passions” are still used as evidence of their unfitness for leadership today. The ideal man who balances physical strength and prowess with civilized refinement would become exceedingly important in the early days of The United States frontier when cowboys and natives came into conflict.



Figure 1.4



Figure 1.5

Goodbye Jewels, Hello Suits. The Sword Can Stay

In contrast to most presidents of the future United States, Kings did not campaign for office - they were born into their position. In order to maintain the illusion of a divine right to rule kings like Henry VIII distinguished themselves from the lower classes with their finery. Actual fighting is for the lower classes so even though the king was equipped with his sword and horn in his portraits, he was equally laden with jewels. His whole ensemble would undoubtedly make real combat impossible and his weaponry can be understood as more a performance of soldiering rather than a practical interpretation. The king is a commander, his people are the actors and this clear class distinction is represented in portraiture.

From a modern perspective in the 21st century it is difficult to not see the garish dress and makeup of European kings as decidedly *feminine* rather than masculine - no matter what the princely handbooks said. To understand the evolving presentation of masculinity in portraiture it is necessary to examine The Great Male Renunciation. Two portraits painted at the beginning and the end of the 18th century illustrate this transition perfectly. Louis XIV's portrait from 1701 by artist Hyacinthe Rigaud (Figure 2.1) has become the most recognizable portrait of the famous "Sun King" of France. He appears absolutely drenched in blue velvet with slender legs elegantly posed like a ballerina to show off his vivid red high heels. The ensemble is heavily patterned and trimmed at every cuff with delicate lace. The whole ensemble would be the envy of any modern day drag queen - except for the prominent sword hanging at his belt. Always the sword. When compared to the Lansdowne Portrait of George Washington (Figure 2.2), painted in 1796 by artist Gilbert Stuart, it is obvious how stark the contrast is. Washington is minimally adorned in black from head to toe with just a modest lace trimming at his cuffs and collar and, of course, a sword in his left hand.



Figure 2.1



Figure 2.2

The Great Male Renunciation, a term coined by the psychoanalyst John Flügel over a hundred years after the fact, was the moment when men's fashion became muted and austere. Put more poetically, it was the moment when men "abandoned their claim to be considered beautiful and henceforth aimed at being only useful" (Flügel 1930, p.111). This of course implies that "womanish" adornments, and by extension women themselves, are useless. One central celebrity of The Great Male Renunciation was a man named Beau Brummel who lived primarily in London in the mid to late 18th century. Beau's sense of style and close friendship with George, the Prince of Wales and eventually King George IV, catapulted him to the peaks of the social society and made him a trend setter for England, France, and the then colonies of The New World. While Brummel and his circle were commonly known as "Dandies", their sense of fashion spread wildly and from Brummel's time onwards the suit would dominate men's formal fashion. In modern society, "Many...men have opted out altogether, becoming actively unfashionable by neglect, or dressing so as not to be noticed, such that contemporary manliness has come to be 'defined in direct opposition to fashion.'" (Titmark 2015, p. 2) The suit is now nearly ubiquitous in portraits of the powerful in all of the Western world.

The American Frontier As a Model of Manliness

The United States is a young country compared to its European counterparts. Older countries have creation mythologies that often involve a certain level of mysticism and stretch back to a time before most forms of reliable record keeping were available. This is not the case for The United States. The oldest civilizations in what is now America were nearly wiped out in its rapid expansion of what Americans think of as The Frontier with a capital F. Thus The Frontier itself has played a foundational role in modern American identity. As Frederick Jackson Turner put it,

*"American democracy was born of no theorist's dream; it was not carried in the Susan Constant to Virginia, nor in the Mayflower to Plymouth. It came out of the American forest, and it gained new strength each time it touched a new frontier,"*⁶

The frontier was the ideal proving ground for a uniquely American manhood independent from British society. Distance from the old world in England was directly tied to American authenticity, "the further West one went the more exceptionally 'American' they would become as they moved farther away from the influences of Europe and toward the creation of a unique nation." (Smith 2016, p. 2) It was one man alone against the land and the savage natives and his survival depended on his ability to conquer both. The mythology around the frontier man deepened as industrialization took hold in the new country and caused a new masculinity crisis because "Cities and machines, defined as feminine, did not require the physical effort men used on the frontier, which in turn demonstrated their masculinity" (McMenamin 2014, p. 11).

⁵ Turner, F. J. (n.d.). *The Significance of the Frontier in American History (1893)*. American Historical Association.

[https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/the-significance-of-the-frontier-in-american-history-\(1893\)#:~:text=The%20most%20significant%20thing%20about,does%20not%20need%20sharp%20definition.](https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/the-significance-of-the-frontier-in-american-history-(1893)#:~:text=The%20most%20significant%20thing%20about,does%20not%20need%20sharp%20definition.)

Inventing the Cowboy

Frederich Remington was a painter, illustrator, writer, and sculptor working in the 19th Century at a time when Americans were feeling intense nostalgia for the wild days of Westward expansion and the fever of Manifest Destiny. His work would come to define the image of the American West. Harper's Magazine, the oldest continuously published magazine in the United States, "put in Remington's hand the pen that invented the American cowboy" (Logan 1992, p.85). The word "invented" is significant because "the West of Remington's time was...a different place from the place he presented in his art." (Logan 1992, p. 75) By the 1880's when Remington first actually visited the Western states of Montana and California he found that "What he hoped would be wild, was tamed; what he hoped would be boundless, was fenced; what he hoped would be frontier, was civilized." (Logan 1992, p. 78) It seems he felt it was his personal calling to maintain the fiction of the frontier as eastern Americans saw it and he set about mythologizing the men and the work of the West.

The first order of business was to "re-establish the idea of the cowboy as an icon of masculinity." (Logan 1992, p.79) Before Remington's makeover the image of the cowboy had become that of a dirty drunken hooligan menacing saloons (Logan 1992). To rectify this, Remington focused his illustrations on the environment and the work of his new cowboy. Harsh desert sunlight and rearing horses took center stage and lent an air of drama to what might otherwise look to eastern viewers like a bunch of bored men moving cows from one place to another.

In his painting, "A Buck Jumper" (Figure 2.4), Remington shows viewers his cowboy in all his mythological glory. The man sits atop a horse that is in midair as it attempts to buck its rider off the saddle. The wildness of the animal contrasts with the graceful athleticism of the rider who appears to be in complete control of his stallion. The act of breaking a horse can be seen as a microcosm of the frontier itself. A test of man against nature. This is not Man, as in the misogynistic term for humans, but man as in specifically not women. Industrialization had eroded some of the barriers to work for women as machines removed some of the physicality from labor; in Remington's West the cowboy's bodily strength and skill brought this beast under his control. This motif was persistent through much of his work as can be seen in the images below.



Figure 2.3



Figure 2.4



Figure 2.5



Figure 2.6

Further proliferation of the mythologized cowboy on the frontier came in the form of touring Wild West shows which blended theater, historical re-enactments (of questionable accuracy), petting zoo, and rodeo into one. The most famous of these was Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show which featured the adventures of Cody and Carver on the frontier. The show opened in 1883 at a time when the U.S. Census had officially proclaimed the frontier closed and Americans "mourned its passing and with it, the end of national exceptionalism" (Seaton 2015, p. 17). The nostalgia for the frontier fueled audiences who attended Wild West shows to meet the heroes they'd seen in Remington's paintings and read about in dime store novels. "Audiences believed that Wild West shows presented a more authentic version of cowboy life than that lived by real-life hands engaged in ranch work in the West." (Seaton 2015, p. 25) The shows depicted colorful scenes of cowboys mounting daring rescue missions to save White Americans from the savage natives that held them captive, "the rescue scenes allowed Buffalo Bill and his Congress of Rough Riders to define their masculinity in contrast to violent Indians and domestic women." (McMenamin 2014, p. 13) The caricature of the cowboy and the West evolved into the cowboy western film genre and would eventually become the simulacrum of American identity to be used by generations of politicians as a shorthand for their authenticity.

It's impossible to fully understand the formation of American frontier masculinity without taking a quick detour to examine the pseudoscientific theory of Social Darwinism. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection was published in 1859 in his famous book, *The Origin of Species*. This title is the one most well known but in fact the original complete title was, *On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*⁶. Social Darwin theorists focus on this latter, lesser known part of the title and have used Darwin's theory as scientific proof that some races are superior to others. This perversion of evolutionary theory has been used as justification for forced sterilization, Eugenics, disenfranchisement, and in the case of the American frontier - Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny was a term coined to express the inevitable and divine right of early Americans to expand the boundaries of the country westward all the way to the Pacific Ocean.⁷

In "It Is Here The Romance of My Life Began", Michael S. McCenamin writes that early American manhood was born from a confluence of societal changes including an explosion of industrialization, a surge in immigration, and women's entry into the workforce. These changes

⁶ J A., Desmond (1999, July 26). *Charles Darwin: British Naturalist*. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Darwin>

⁷ Heidler, D. S., & Heidler, J. T. (1998, July 20). *Manifest Destiny*. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Manifest-Destiny>

threatened men's masculinity and it's easy to see how Remington's version of cowboys on the frontier became so appealing. McCenamin explains that Social Darwinists used evolutionary theory as proof that men existed at a higher evolutionary stage than women and often compared non White men to women and children to intentionally emasculate them (p. 11).

The role of political imagery, especially during campaigns, in The United States is entirely different than it was for pre 19th Century European monarchs. Presidents have to run a political campaign and sell the public on their personal story and vision for the future. Candidates are constantly trying to convince the voting population of their identification with the working class and precisely *not* emphasize any class distinction. Their right to govern is derived from their humble origins; the 1840 presidential race was even dubbed "The Log Cabin Campaign" (Figure 2.8) as William Henry Harrison staged himself as a folksy cider brewer in a log cabin. This was despite the fact that Harrison actually came from quite a wealthy and privileged background. The woodcut shown in figure 2.9 was distributed during the 1840 campaign to cement this narrative in voters' minds.

Even president Lincoln spoke repeatedly about his poor family and unglamorous upbringing during his many campaigns for public office stating in one speech that he "was born and ever remained in the most humble walks of life" (Winkle 2000, p. 1). There's considerable debate around exactly how humble those origins were but Lincoln remains one of the most mythologized presidents in American history and he didn't shy away from playing the frontiersman narrative to his advantage. He was even called "The Rail Splitter" (Figure 2.7) after a painting of him working on railroad tracks was circulated during his 1860 presidential campaign despite the fact he had become a prominent lawyer by that time (Winkle 2000). In the painting we see a young, unbearded Lincoln swinging a large two-handed hammer down onto a nail in a piece of railroad track. There's an undeniable ruggedness to the scene. His shirt is unbuttoned halfway down his torso and he appears alone in a vast green forest. Felled trees in the background might suggest he's been clearing the forest (single handedly) for the laying of the new track - taming the frontier. The fact that he does this manual labor alone is an example of the almost fetishistic American love for self-sufficiency.



Figure 2.7



Figure 2.8



Figure 2.9

The Frontier Myth in 20th Century Politics

The inspiring story of American Exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny, and undefeated expansion gave The United States and its citizens a much needed story about itself “because it provided a usable history for a public becoming increasingly conscious of its role as a world power” (Smith 2016, 5). American presidents leaned on this mythology for next century in their campaigns.

A decade after the height of Remington’s career, Theodore Roosevelt would become the 26th president of the United States. He was a huge fan of Remington’s work and his presidential campaign imagery showed remarkable parallels to the artist’s portfolio. In the button below (Figure 3.1) we can see Roosevelt literally dressed as a cowboy atop his horse complete with the hat and bandana that would accompany any kids cowboy costume today. This campaign button was circulated during his first bid for a full-term presidency in 1904. While the soldier existed as the pinnacle of manhood in Europe with its ongoing intra continental conflicts, The United States leaned on the cowboy. Encounters with Native Americans weren’t handled by the American military but rather by individuals or small informal militias. What connects the European soldier to the American cowboy is the need to *prove* one’s masculinity.

With the official closing of the frontier at the turn of the 20th century, Roosevelt set his sights on East Africa. A place that “could be, and should be settled as the American West was settled” (McMenamin 2014, p. 16). “Our Teddy’s Homecoming March ” (Figure 3.3) was distributed as the cover art for his 1912 presidential campaign music. Here we see Roosevelt bridging the gap between North America and Africa, the *new* frontier. He is garbed in hunting clothes and shaking hands with Uncle Sam. Looking closely at the figures present on each continent we can see men with American flags dotted across the eastern states of the U.S. The African continent shows mostly wild animals and a few shirtless dark figures among them. Roosevelt was recycling the ideas of Remington’s frontier onto the new *international* frontier. The generic Africans intermixed with the animals suggests that there is little difference between the two and in Roosevelt’s eyes and, just like the Native Americans of the *old* frontier, they must be civilized. The Africans are not shown running in fear or resisting in any way, in fact they seem drawn to Roosevelt’s foot which suggests they are *happy* to be under the boot of the American president. It’s notable that Roosevelt doesn’t carry emblematic gifts like books or resources, he’s not extending an olive branch to promote peaceful cooperation, he’s holding a

rifle with his back to them. He's a conqueror of men and beasts just like in the portraits of the European monarchs that preceded him.



Figure 3.1



Figure 3.2



Figure 3.3

In the 1960's, the frontier myth was met with an international crisis in Southeast Asia. President Lyndon B Johnson (figure 3.4), like so many presidents before him, utilized the myth of The West to secure political power all the way up to the Vice President under John F. Kennedy. After Kennedy's assassination, LBJ became president and it would be his job to deal with the war in Vietnam. Johnson cast the Vietnam war as just another frontier in need of civilizing just like the old western frontier and East Africa. At a speech at Johns Hopkins University he described the war as, "civilization and savagery going head to head, not in nineteenth century Texas or Arizona, but today on the frontiers of Southeast Asia." (Smith 2016, p. 256) His inability to repeat the success of the past with the same methods was the first time The United States faced international failure and the American populace increasingly saw LBJ as a "reckless, hapless, and bullying cowboy" (Smith 2016, 238). The image of the cowboy Remington had worked so hard to make over had come full circle back to the belligerent drunk causing trouble at the saloon. This would remain true until an actor, most famous for his roles in cowboy westerns, named Ronald Reagan came onto the political stage in the 1980's. It's difficult to imagine in the current political climate but for most of American history, the frontier and masculinity politics had been the turf of the Democratic Party and it wasn't until Reagan that it was fully, and as cartoonishly as ever, adopted by the political Right



Figure 3.4

The 1960's and 70's were a fraught period for the United States. Losing the Vietnam War abroad and unparalleled civil unrest at home had called the entire national identity into question. Nixon and the Watergate scandal had shaken the people's trust in government and by the end of Jimmy Carter's presidency liberalism, and by extension the Democratic Party, appeared to be a failed philosophy. This was fertile ground for "the entire Frontier Myth to shift sharply to the right and take on a new form from which Reagan and his supporters stood to benefit from the most." (Smith 2016, p. 297) Ronald Reagan would become "the presidential leader and symbol of the nation's conservative, nostalgic drive to restore an imaginary vanished past." (Smith 2016, p. 295) The hallmarks of frontier masculinity, honed over the last century, were at the forefront of Regan's political image as he took to the national stage preaching about, "individual initiative, self-reliance, freedom, and independence from government." (Smith 2016, p. 295)

The Reagan Devolution

Reagan's campaign and image harkened back to the days of the Log Cabin Campaign of 1840 as he depicted himself as a "regular-folks candidate, angry about corruption and incompetence in government, longing for the good old days of the nostalgic frontier, 'traditional' family values, the right to bear arms without government interference, free-market individualism, and the champion of strength in the face of vacillating liberals." (Smith 2016, p. 299) Images from Reagan's campaign show him often in a cowboy hat, the modern shorthand for everything the new conservative movement stood for. His campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again", now re-purposed by Donald Trump, sheds light on an ever present theme in American masculinity - nostalgia. Judith Kegan Gardiner wrote in her book, *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory*, that "the construction of a masculine identity is a nostalgic formation, always missing, lost, or about to be lost, its ideal form located in a past that advances with each generation in order to recede just beyond its grasp" (qtd. In McMenamain, p. 8). In other words, men perpetually used to be men but they never are currently.

In his essay, "Longing, Nostalgia, and Golden Age Politics", Andrew R. Murphy explains the concept of the American jeremiad. He states, "Although virtually all social criticism and political theorizing are animated by dissatisfaction with present conditions, nostalgic and Golden Age politics depend on the...claim that some aspect of the past offers the best way forward in addressing the inadequacies and corruptions of the present." (p. 126) Ronald Reagan embodied the American jeremiad to great political effect. The 1960's and 70's are seen as some of the most turbulent decades in the U.S. since the Civil War. "Nostalgia", writes Murphy, "represents a powerful coping mechanism, helping to maintain identity continuity during times of social upheaval." (Murphy 2009, 128) The civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the push for gay rights and visibility had distorted traditional gender roles and Reagan campaigned on a promise to restore his country back to the "golden age" of the 1950's.

To communicate this nostalgia we can first look at Reagan's official presidential portrait (Figure 4.1). When compared to an advertising image from the 1950's (Figure 4.2) the resemblance is uncanny. By presenting himself as an archetypal man of the 1950's Reagan is subtly communicating that he should be trusted as a leader because he can restore the country to a time before all those women and gays were yelling in the streets. It's Social Darwinism disguised by a smile and coiffed hair. In case the image is *too* subtle, his 1980 campaign poster (Figure 4.3) spells it out in plain words. America was a great country when everyone knew their place and the pecking order was unquestioned.



Figure 4.1



Figure 4.2

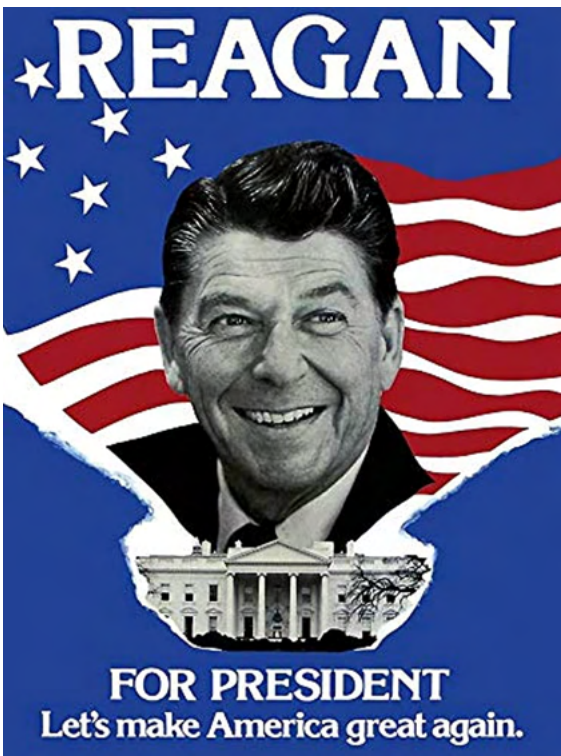


Figure 4.3



Figure 4.4

By 1984 Reagan, with much help from his wife Nancy, had fully fleshed out his message and the accompanying media. “It’s Morning in America” is considered one of the most influential ad campaigns in United States history.⁸ Officially titled, “Prouder, Stronger, Better” the sixty second ad is dripping with pastel imagery of almost entirely White Americans across the country. The one exception being two non-White children at 00:42 who look on as a man raises an American flag. Gentle string music, suburban homes, white picket fences and a dreamy wedding paint the picture of a flawless nation at its best. The real success of the ad comes with its closing line, “Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?” The entire setup of Reagan’s idealized America exists for this payoff in which Reagan’s disembodied voice “implicitly challeng[es] voters to turn their back on it” (Raine, 2004)

This is the essential theme of nostalgia within “Morning in America”, the campaign, and Reagan’s entire presidential message. Murphy writes about the politics of nostalgia that, “All narratives are partial, moralized tales, and narratives duel with each other in the political sphere not merely by offering statistics, but by attempting to present a more compelling story and by appealing to their audiences’ sense of concern about the future.” (Murphy 2009 , p. 129) The idea of manufacturing fear about the future and presenting yourself as the solution isn’t novel now and it wasn’t in the 1980’s but Reagan’s approach was to “control the future by making it into the past.” (Smith 2016, p. 335) The past in this case was a country that “needed to return to its essential identity, a ‘pre-urban homogeneous nation where hard work and private charity were all that anyone needed in an unthreatening world.’” (Aronstein 2005, p. 119)

A New York Times article written in the leadup up to the 1984 election titled, “Other Side of Gender Gap: Reagan Seen as Man’s Man” encapsulates the success of Reagan’s message. In terms of politics the gender gap generally refers to the underrepresentation of women in government. In 1984 there were twenty four women elected to the U.S. Congress out of a total of 535 seats⁹. This means that even though women make up roughly 50% of the American population, and in certain years slightly more than half¹⁰, they represented less than 5% of the elected leaders in Congress. In the aforementioned article the “Other Side” was referring to

⁸ Beschloss, M. (2016, May 7). *The Ad That Helped Reagan Sell Good Times to an Uncertain Nation*. The New York Times.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/business/the-ad-that-helped-reagan-sell-good-times-to-an-uncertain-nation.html>

⁹ (2016, May 7). *History of Women in the U.S. Congress*. Center for American Women and Politics.

<https://cawp.rutgers.edu/facts/levels-office/congress/history-women-us-congress>

¹⁰ (1984, September 1). *Estimates of the Population of the United States to September 1, 1984*. United States Census. <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/1984/demographics/P25-959.pdf>

Reagan's soaring popularity with men, and especially White men in the country. The article contains several colorful quotes that explain exactly why White men loved him so much.

"Reagan is a healthy dose of macho, and Mondale is part of the Brie-and-chablis crowd. The Mondale people need to toughen their boy up."

"It's the perfect gentleman versus the cowboy,"

"What you have with the President is an appearance of competence and being in charge."

The "gentleman" in the second quote is Walter Mondale who ran against Reagan in 1984. His running mate was Geraldine Ferraro, the first woman ever to be nominated to a major party ticket as vice president. While there is no historical consensus on whether Ferraro's gender played a significant role in the outcome of the election, she did energize women voters and activist women were exactly what Reagan was promising to squash with his message of patriarchal nostalgia. Mondale was, according to Robert S. Strauss, the former chief of the Democratic National Committee, "a man's man. He likes to do the things that we associate with male, what do you call it, macho. He's a fisherman. He likes to sit around and have a drink in the evening with his shoes off and a cigar in his mouth with his friends. He's a hunter. He's interested in sports." His problem was he couldn't compete with the machismo that dripped from his former western movie star opponent. Jody Powell, who was President Carter's press secretary, understood this perfectly and was quoted in the article saying, "If I were in a bar fight and needed somebody to back me up," he said, "I would choose Carter over Reagan 1,000 to 1. But we're in the image market." She also alluded to Mondale's milder public personality when she was quoted saying that there is an "'unfortunate'" tendency to see a gentle manner as a sign of weakness." Reagan won the 1984 election in a landslide victory carrying 49 of the 50 states.¹¹

The appeal of Reagan's straight laced conventional masculinity can be tied to arguably the other most famous man of the 1980's, Michael Jackson. Jackson, along with Prince, Boy George, David Bowie, and many others were part of the growing "androgyny craze" (Vogel

¹¹ (1985, June 1). *FEDERAL ELECTIONS 84 Election Results for U.S. President, the U.S. Senate and the u.S. House of Representatives*. Federal Elections Commission. <https://www.fec.gov/resources/cms-content/documents/federaelections84.pdf>

2015). In his essay, “Freaks in the Reagan Era”, Joseph Vogel describes the Reagan Revolution, as it would come to be known, as “not just about policies; it was about images and narratives of strength, individualism, patriotic militarism, and unambiguous machismo.” (Vogel 2015, p. 473) This was a stark contrast to someone like Prince who was on stage singing to millions of adoring fans “I’m not a woman/I’m not a man/I am something that you’ll never understand.” One can imagine Nancy Reagan’s pearl clutching.

These men (Figures 4.5 and 4.6) didn’t define themselves by the same standards of masculinity as those forged in the American frontier. It’s not clear they defined themselves by masculinity at all. Vogel called this movement New Pop Cinema and their concurrent rise with the shift of the frontier image to the conservative Right “illustrates the tensions, paradoxes, and competing visions of masculinity that persisted throughout the decade.” (Vogel 2015, p. 477) But around the time of Reagan’s second election in 1984, a serious backlash was forming against them. The gift the New Pop Cinema movement gave to Reagan’s team was an enemy. A group to point at and say, “vote for me or this is what will become of all men”. But Reagan couldn’t deny their star power and mass appeal. He understood the power of pop culture, he was a famous actor himself after all, what he needed was his own *modern* pop culture ally.



Figure 4.5



Figure 4.6

1984 was the year Bruce Springsteen released his iconic album, “Born in the USA”. The cover art, shot by Annie Leibowitz, shows Springsteen from behind in iconic American everyman clothes: blue jeans, white t-shirt, and a baseball hat in his back pocket. The scene is set against a red and white striped background to complete the American flag. Springsteen’s image was much more in line with Reagan’s. Vogel writes, “He fit much easier into traditional boxes of how men were supposed to look and act. He was white, straight, masculine, blue-collar, had a raspy voice, and played guitar.....visually he looked like he was pulled right out of Reagan’s ‘Morning in America’ ad” (Vogel 2015, 478).



Figure 4.7

This wasn’t missed by Reagan’s election team. If Reagan was the cowboy blended with the perfect 1950’s family patriarch, Springsteen was the blue collar worker and represented a demographic Reagan didn’t hold as firmly. Reagan’s team even reached out to Springsteen for use of the album’s title track “Born in the USA” and was “politely rebuffed.”¹² Donald Trump

¹² Doyle, J. (2012, April 12). *Reagan & Springsteen 1984*. The Pop History Dig. <https://pophistorydig.com/topics/reagan-springsteen-1984/>

would attempt to use the song in his own campaign rallies decades later and it's worth noting that the anthem is considered one of the most widely misappropriated songs in all of political history.¹³ What Reagan and Trump both misunderstood was that much of Bruce Springsteen's discography, and *especially* "Born in the USA", was about "a broken system and of a government that sees its citizens as disposable cogs in a war machine— and by no means is a pro-America anthem." (ibid)

Reagan did mention Springsteen by name in a speech in New Jersey, Springsteen's hometown, as a way to tie the two more closely together because, Vogel writes "Regardless of Springsteen's intentions for the song, then, he became, as Bryan Garman observes, 'for many Americans a white hard-body hero whose masculinity confirmed the values of patriarchy and patriotism, work ethic and rugged individualism, and who clearly demarcated the boundaries between men and women, black and white, heterosexual and homosexual.'" (Vogel 2015, p. 478) By associating himself with both the music and the imagery of Bruce Springsteen as America's everyman Reagan started a now well established theme in Republican politics best explained by The Boss himself. In a 2005 interview he said "This was when the Republicans first mastered the art of co-opting anything and everything that seemed fundamentally American, and if you were on the other side, you were somehow unpatriotic". (ibid) When Reagan pulled the album "Born in the USA" into the world of politics he was able to say that "this is an American man" and if you don't look and act like him - white t-shirt, jeans, baseball hat - or myself - clean cut, gelled, hair, suit - then you are neither of those things.

Ronald Reagan was able to construct a strong consistent message that core conservative values come from the past and our future lies in looking backwards. Drawing on fear of changing gender roles and expression, he leaned heavily on nostalgia for "simpler times" when lines were drawn clearly between the sexes and the races. It's not unlike the princely manuals British kings were trained with in 18th Century England that focused so heavily on the separation of the sexes. Making clear distinctions between who can embody masculinity and who femininity demarcates two different realms of existence and controls who has access to opportunity, resources and ultimately, power.

¹³ Malloy, P. (2018, April 17). *Are Politicians Too Dumb to Understand the Lyrics to 'Born in the USA'?* Daily Beast. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/are-politicians-too-dumb-to-understand-the-lyrics-to-born-in-the-usa>

The Era of Donald Trump

The election of Barack Obama, the first Black president of the United States, in 2008 was a milestone moment of progress. The next eight years were historic in many other ways as well including the Supreme Court decision in 2015 to legalize same sex marriage across all fifty states. 2015 was also the year of the #metoo movement - possibly the strongest collective women's movement since the 1970's. The #metoo movement centered around allegations that Harvey Weinstein, an extremely successful Hollywood film producer, had been, at best, sexually harassing women for decades and, at worst, outright coercing young actresses into sexual encounters in exchange for casting. In the ensuing media coverage it became clear that this was an open secret in Hollywood that had been allowed to go on for years without public acknowledgment or repercussions. The outrage spawned a social media movement using the hashtag #metoo by women to shed light on the ubiquity of sexual harassment and assault felt by women in the U.S. and around the world. These events, taken with an increased visibility of the transgender community, were an unprecedented threat to hegemonic masculinity and by the end of Obama's presidency, White male rage had reached a boiling point that Donald Trump could tap into.

Donald Trump is not like the former presidents discussed in this essay. He was born and raised as New York City royalty and any claim he tried to make to the frontier myth would have been laughable. He instead played into the grievances of mostly White American men who felt their place in society slipping as a result of the progress of minorities and women in the Obama years. He was a man of the Reagan era but in many ways the opposite of Reagan himself. A New York Times opinion piece from 2020 discussed Trump's brand of masculinity as "a Potemkin patriarchy, the he-man re-engineered for an image-based, sensation-saturated and very modern entertainment economy."¹⁴ The author, Susan Faludi, elaborates on the evolution of masculinity and writes, "Contemporary manliness is increasingly defined by display — in Mr. Trump's case, a pantomime of aggrieved aggression: the curled lip, the exaggerated snarl. Display permeates his ratings-obsessed presidency." (ibid) The 2016 election, which pitted Donald Trump against Hillary Clinton, was the perfect showdown and full culmination of the tension that had built over the previous eight years.

¹⁴ Faludi, S. (2020, October 29). *Trump's Thoroughly Modern Masculinity*. New York Times Opinion. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/29/opinion/trump-masculinity-femininity.html>

Paul Elliot Johnson wrote about Trump's brand of politics as demagoguery and explains how this was such an effective campaign strategy in the Obama years leading up to the 2016 election. "Demagogues" writes Johnson, "encourage audiences to self-identify as victims on the basis of *felt* precarity, encouraging the well-off and privileged to adopt the mantle of victimhood at the expense of those who occupy more objectively fraught positions." (p. 2) Polling data from 2016 found that "Trump supporters were more likely to believe men are discriminated against and that society has become 'too soft and feminine'" (Carioan & Sobotka 2018, p. 1). Trump has been able to play on this narrative, now referred to as "White masculine victimhood" academically, because "it helps [White men] imagine themselves as victims of a political tragedy centered around the displacement of 'real America' from the political center by a feminized political establishment." (Johnson 2017, p. 3) Trump's rising popularity near the end of the Obama presidency and his victory over Hillary Clinton in 2016 emboldened a whole new brand of right wing American politicking.

To understand how this reaction to the Obama years has taken shape in mass media over the last decade it's important to understand the theory of Masculine Overcompensation and Gender Hierarchy (Carian & Sobotka 2018 p. 1). In a study done before the 2016 election to examine how this theory applies to the current political climate, authors Emily K. Carian and Tagart Cain Sobotka explain that "masculinity is regarded as more desirable and respectable than femininity and... Because femininity is subordinate to masculinity and they feel they have more to lose, men feel more compelled to overcompensate in the face of gender identity threat than women." (p. 3) The attempt to compensate for a perceived gender threat results in "increased justification of social inequality, less support for gender equality, more benevolent sexism, more homophobic attitudes, and increased enjoyment of sexist and anti-gay humor." (DiMuccio & Knowles 2019, p. 26) Furthermore, "masculinity is relational, as hegemonic masculinity gains its status through the subordination of femininity and other forms of masculinity" (Cain & Sobotka, 2018, p. 2) Trump's campaign appearances, speeches, and rallies were chock-full of examples of the above, "From claiming to kiss and grope women without their consent to mocking a handicapped male journalist, Trump's actions and rhetoric work toward the subordination of women and particular groups of men." (Cain & Sobotka, 2018, p. 2) The combination of demagoguery and masculine overcompensation culminated in the 2016 election where "Trump head-to-head against Clinton—served as a powerful symbol for [the] desire to return to a more gender-conventional society in which masculinity is publicly

considered higher status than femininity.” (DiMuccio & Knowles 2019, p. 27) These sentiments were never more on display than in the political ads of the Trump era.

Guns in Politics

The masculine symbols of the past have included the sword, the horn, and the cowboy hat but in the 21st Century United States it is unquestionably the gun. Americans' sense of identity with gun ownership finds its routes in The Reconstruction era of the post Civil War South. In an interview with Scientific America, researcher Nick Buttrick, who studies the psychological relationship between guns and Americans, explains that "white Southerners started cultivating the tradition of the home arsenal immediately after the Civil War because of insecurities and racial fears. During the rest of the 19th century, those anxieties metamorphosized into a fetishization of the firearm to the point that, in the present day, gun owners view their weapons as adding meaning and a sense of purpose to their lives."¹⁵ Furthermore he directly connects the gun with a masculinity crisis after the war when there was suddenly official recognition of "inferior males" (Social Darwinism yet again) as equals in the eyes of the state. Gun ownership was "sold as a tool that helped owners reclaim their masculinity and manhood after losing the Civil War." (ibid) The 21st Century masculinity crisis has substantial parallels. As previously oppressed groups move towards equality - White men rally to their guns for security. Buttrick goes on to explain that, through his research he and his team have found data connecting the areas with the highest population of previously enslaved people with the highest rates of gun ownership in the United States. (ibid) Some of these areas of the country have been the breeding ground for arguably the most violent and gun forward political ads in U.S. history.

Eric Greitens ran for a Missouri Congressional seat in 2018 using an ad titled, "Big Guns"¹⁶ which is a double entendre for his bulging manly biceps and an allusion to what is to come. The ad opens on Greitens donning a pair of heavy duty ear plugs while a theatrical narrator describes the "Obama Democrat machine" that presumably threatens everything Greitens stands for. Greitens proceeds to position himself behind a machine gun so large it needs its own heavy duty tripod and chair and is fed by a belt of huge bullets. He fires the machine gun at full speed, at nothing, for the next ten seconds while the narrator describes him as a conservative war hero who "brings out the big guns" to his fight against progressive policies. The ad concludes with Greitens smiling and giving a thumbs up to the off camera

¹⁵ Novak, S. (2023, March 29). *How the Gun Became Integral to the Self-Identity of Millions of Americans*. Scientific American. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/29/opinion/trump-masculinity-femininity.html>

¹⁶ [Eric Greitens]. (2016, July 31). *Big Guns* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-VfFi6Z14Q>

audience in a “wasn’t that awesome” expression. With the roughly meter long barrel of the weapon perched between his spread legs it’s hard to imagine more overcompensation.

Blake Masters ran an ad in the 2020 Arizona Senate race titled “The Second Amendment is Not About Duck Hunting”.¹⁷ Masters’ ad is considerably darker in tone than Greitens’. Unsettling strings are the musical backdrop to Masters in the desert speaking directly to camera. He says “This is a short barreled rifle. It wasn’t designed for hunting. This is designed to kill people”. He continues with, “the Second Amendment is not about duck hunting, it’s about protecting your family and your country”. He goes on to explain that when Joe Biden “handed Afghanistan to the Taliban” their first move was to disarm the people and that if progressives have their way Americans will be disarmed as well. He proclaims that “without gun rights, you have no rights.”

Kay Daly ran for Congress in North Carolina with an ad titled “Rino Renee”.¹⁸ The ad is a political attack ad against the incumbent, Renee Elmers, and shows a series of unflattering photos of the congresswoman. The narrator says “This feminist voted to cut veterans benefits and gut the military budget...she voted to let homosexuals pretend they’re married...she’s pro amnesty and voted to let convicted illegal alien child molesters stay in America and she’s a RINO”. In case viewers were unfamiliar with the term RINO, a lower thirds title explains it stands for “Republican In Name Only”. The candidate Kay Daly appears only in the last seconds of the ad with a large black shotgun and she announces “I’m going RINO hunting” as she fires the weapon. With her use of the word feminist as a slur and her suggestion that she will actually murder her opponent she is communicating to her audience that they shouldn’t worry that she’s a woman, she’s just like one of the guys, “White women candidates increasingly suggest that their ‘packing heat’ makes them endowed with leadership potential.” (Neville-Shepard & Kelly, 2020 p. 5). As stated earlier in this essay, masculinity does not belong to men and Daly is participating in Masculine Overcompensation to win over her aggrieved White male audience. She is saying she will fight against women’s equality, deport minorities and strip away the rights of “unmasculine men” to uphold White male power.

¹⁷ [Blake Masters for Senate]. (2016, July 31). *The Second Amendment is not about duck hunting*. [Video]. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s588GF_UfGw&t=39s

¹⁸ [Kay Daly for Congress]. (2015, September 17). *"RINO Renee" Ellmers* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-Br1GxdGJo>

Lastly in the trigger happy campaign ad lineup is Will Brooke who ran for Congress in Alabama in 2014. His ad titled, "Let's Do Some Damage"¹⁹ features Brooke sitting on the open bed of his truck with a large hunting rifle and a giant stack of white papers. He says, "We're down here to have a little fun today and talk about two serious subjects: the 2nd Amendment, and see how much damage we can do to this copy of Obamacare" thus revealing the contents of the stack of white papers. The Affordable Care Act, the official title for the bill commonly known as Obamacare, is considered President Obama's signature legislative achievement and in this ad can be taken as a metaphor for the Obama presidency itself. He proceeds to box up the copy of the Affordable Care Act and drive out in the forest. Upon arrival it's revealed he has not just one rifle, but at least four plus a pistol. Twangy country music swells as Brooke takes aim and unloads round after round at the proposed bill that he's set up as a target. He continuously checks how deeply he's penetrated the stack and, shaking his head in pantomime disappointment, mounts a larger gun and fires in his attempt to eviscerate the stack. Several shots are done in slow motion to create an elegant ballet of flying bullets and dramatic booming gun shots. The effect is similar to Frederick Remington's painting of "The Buck Jumper" which showcased the graceful athleticism of the rider as he broke his steed. Unsatisfied with the effectiveness of his many firearms he proceeds to load the stack into a woodchipper. As the desiccated papers fly into the air Brooke lets us know that "we've had some fun today". The whole process is reminiscent of a modern day lynching.

What ties these ads together is that they portray "a way of life needing to be defended... a call to arms echoed by others who ask viewers to join the fight to return what has allegedly been taken." (Neville-Shepard & Kelly, 2020 p. 7) By focusing on 2nd Amendment rights and sometimes citing specific pieces of legislation the ads are "evoking violence against government, established order, and the legal process that has made political and social change possible" (Neville-Shepard & Kelly, 2020 p. 2) When thinking about the process of passing legislation - elected representatives meet, debate, and vote on public policy - it's the foundation of democracy. The men, and occasional women, in these ads are expressing that democratic systems should only be in place if they serve White hegemonic masculinity and if they don't this can serve as justification for the use of force to restore the status quo.

¹⁹ [Will Brooke]. (2014, March 26). *Let's Do Some Damage* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0I2z9cCC9zs>

Border Security as Frontier

“Build the wall” was possibly the most recognizable slogan of Donald Trump’s next to “lock her up”. The wall in this case is a reference to a literal wall along the border between the United States and Mexico. Border security has been an animating issue for conservative Americans for centuries but Donald Trump has made it the centerpiece of his presidency. What “the border” has meant historically versus what it means now is nothing short of ironic. The same ethos and mentality have been applied to nearly opposite structural ideas. This essay has discussed the myth of the American frontier at length and its ideas are the driving force behind the “build the wall” movement amongst Trump’s supporters. While the frontier and Manifest Destiny were about American Exceptionalism and Americans’ God given right to near limitless expansion by whatever means necessary, the wall is about American Exceptionalism and Americans’ God given right to keep others out by whatever means necessary.

The gun toting ads described in the previous chapter were about straight White men reclaiming a position they had supposedly lost because of progressive gains in the Obama years. Political ads about the border wall are about fears conservative Americans have around “Replacement Theory”. The National Immigration Forum defines Replacement Theory as follows: “The ‘great replacement’ theory, in simple terms, states that welcoming immigration policies — particularly those impacting non White immigrants — are part of a plot designed to undermine or ‘replace’ the political power and culture of white people living in Western countries.”²⁰ In this context one can examine Donald Trump’s first political ad in 2016.²¹

The ad opens on a cold, desaturated and high contrast profile portrait of Hillary Clinton against a dark background. A narrator describes the supposed future of the United States under her presidency backed by a dramatic piano score. As images of crowds of Syrian refugees and “caravans” (as they would come to be known) of migrants driving across a desert landscape flick across the screen, the disembodied voice of the narrator talks about “open borders” and “terrorists” and “dangerous criminals” who threaten the peaceful lives of American citizens. These images maintain the dark and highly desaturated tone right up until the flip to the future of the U.S. under Trump. As the music soars optimistically the image processing

²⁰ (n.d.). *The ‘Great Replacement’ Theory, Explained*. National Immigration Forum. <https://immigrationforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Replacement-Theory-Explainer-1122.pdf>

²¹ [Wall Street Journal]. (2016, August 19). *Watch Donald Trump's First Campaign TV Ad* [Video]. Youtube.com. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEgykfioeuw>

changes to bright, warm and saturated. Viewers see military servicemen and aircraft carriers with an overlaying banner stating “terrorists kept out” and “Donald Trump’s America is secure”.

This ad is essentially Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show in reverse. The Wild West shows toured the country showcasing cowboys mounting daring rescues of frontier families from savage, blood thirsty natives. Trump’s advertisement has replaced Native Americans with Central American migrants and refugees. Words like “savage” have been replaced by “criminal” and mohawks by sagging jeans and wife beater tank tops. This is a clear parallel to Social Darwinist theory that places White men above non-White men in the evolutionary pecking order. By casting non-White immigrants (there is no imagery suggesting voters should fear White European immigrants) as terrorists and criminals the ad implicitly telegraphs who the target audience is. This plays into the relational nature of masculinity discussed in the previous chapter as subordinating non-White people helps create an elevated sense of superior Whiteness. Additionally one can see Masculine Overcompensation Theory at play as White men, as a group, perceive a threat they become more likely to justify social inequality. It’s also worth noting, in terms of overcompensation, that the ad suggests an aircraft carrier might be used to stop Central American migrants.

Meme Culture and Liberal Tears

Donald Trump and Ronald Reagan shared a campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again” and each rode that sentiment to victory and the White House for one, and two terms, respectively. Both cast themselves as Washington outsiders who would shake up the establishment. Both gained name recognition and popularity from previous work in the entertainment industry. But by the time Trump was running for election in 2016 the world and the way we communicate in it had changed significantly. The internet and social media platforms, most noticeably Facebook and Twitter, have irrevocably changed campaign messaging to the point that “It is not an exaggeration to say that political campaigns today are social media campaigns. Without incorporating social and digital media into a political campaign, a candidate has almost no chance of being competitive. Communicating with the electorate is vital for politicians, and to do it proficiently, candidates must go where the voters can be found—online”. (Hendricks, Schill 2017, p. 121) But the online discourse around political nominees is not limited to the official campaign media - user generated content that can be easily and widely distributed has enabled many voices to be amplified simultaneously and shift cultural perceptions of public events and people by reinforcing or challenging popular attitudes. In this chapter I’ll explore how meme’s in the era of Trump have perpetuated hegemonic White masculinity and a narrow definition of citizenship in a way that propelled Donald Trump to victory in 2016.

While the definition of a meme can be quite broad, this chapter will focus on the image and caption form. Memes are a form of visual rhetoric and they rely on symbols and slogans understood collectively by the entire culture, or by one specific group. In memes, “complex historical, political, cultural meanings and processes are distilled into easily digestible—but still deceptively complicated—visual images (with captions) that are then ‘liked’ and/or ‘shared’ with a simple click or a swipe of the finger.” (Dickerson, Hoddler 2021 p. 331) In an increasingly attention driven society with an increasingly short attention span, the meme has served as an exceptional tool for the quick dissemination of information. The most important qualities of an online message in the 21st Century are “speed, antagonism...fanaticism and cruelty.” (Neville-Shepard, Kelly, 2020 p. 4) Memes have been compared to “information viruses” that “hop from brain to brain by way of imitation and spread like wildfire (Lincoln 2019, p. 6) Additionally, memes use humor and satire as a way of being provocative and garnering attention through “provok[ing] emotional responses in conversations with members of the left. In what is

often referred to as trolling, alt-right members will inject memes into conversations across social media sites such as Twitter to disrupt and manipulate discourses associated with the left and political correctness.” (Dickerson, Hoddler 2021, p. 332) Furthermore, the “sheer brashness and usage of humor allows those that create and share these memes to deflect and make fun of anyone taking them seriously.” (Dickerson, Hoodler 2021 p.335)

The 2016 presidential campaign was the first ever in the United States that pitted a male candidate against a female candidate on the major party tickets and the memes in the surrounding years reinforced stereotypical ideas about gender and “Examining these gender representations within political memes [is] critical because politics is a male-dominated sphere and positions within are seen as ‘form[s] of masculinity’ (Lincoln 2019, p. 15). For both candidates, memes centered around their fitness for office. Memes about Hillary Clinton predictably attacked her clothing (Figure 8.5) and her sexuality as can be seen in the examples below. Others focused on the affair her husband, Bill Clinton, had with his secretary, Monica Lewinsky, when he was president in the late 90’s (Figures 8.1 and 8.2). The fixation with mocking Bill Clinton’s presidency shows that society still thinks of women’s values in terms of their relationship to their husbands and served to delegitimize Hillary’s place in the race (Figure 8.3). In a 2019 study of popular memes using the hashtag #election2016 study author Taylor Lincoln was able to show that the number of memes about Trump far outpaced those about Hillary. She concluded, “The data shows that women are still underrepresented within this network and the content of the memes. Donald Trump was a driving force and topic within all datasets. This maintains the patriarchal assumptions of politics and it being a man’s profession (Lincoln 2019, p. 31)

**HILLARY CLINTON
LESBIAN?**



**I HAVE IT ON GOOD AUTHORITY
SHE IS NOT FOND OF WEINER.**

Figure 8.1



Figure 8.2



Figure 8.3



Figure 8.4

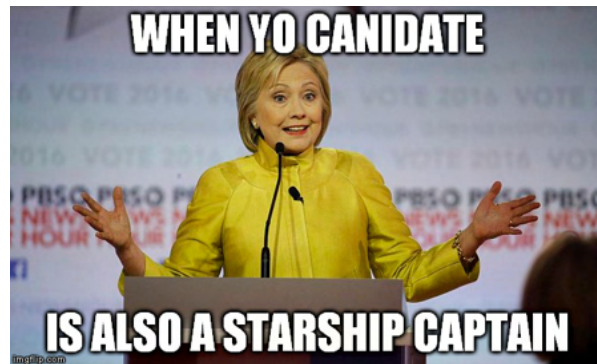


Figure 8.5

Mememes attacking Donald Trump from the left also worked to emasculate him which can be interpreted as an attempt to delegitimize him in the eyes of his own supporters. The many, *many*, mememes created to poke fun at Trump's hair (Figures 8.6 and 8.9) tie directly back to King Henry VIII's use of a hat to cover his balding head. Baldness has long been associated with a lack of virility and both leaders sought to cover this emasculating vulnerability. For as many mememes about his hair, there are just as many about the orange tinted makeup he wears daily (Figure 8.8). Attacks on a female candidate's makeup from the Right would cause outrage on the Left but in this case, in addition to being petty, the Left is feminizing Trump as a way to point out the hypocrisy of his macho attitude and that of his supporters. The same effect was achieved when someone pointed out that Trump's hands seemed unusually small and the meme below with the caption, "I want the right to bear arms" (Figure 8.7) is a clever play on small hands joke coupled with the right wing zealotry over the 2nd Amendment. Trump was so offended by this suggestion about his small hands he addressed it in a public statement where he defended the size of his penis saying "if they're small something else must be small, I guarantee you there is not problem, I guarantee you"²²

When not targeting his physical appearance, mememes poked fun at Trump's many failed businesses. This was easy territory considering so much of his campaign rhetoric focused on his *success* as a businessman as evidenced by his immense wealth but public records have shown a number of bankrupt businesses, listed in figure 8.10 and mocked in figure 8.11. This

²² [France 24 English]. (2016, March 4). *Donald Trump defends the size of his hands "I guarantee there is no problem"* [Video]. Youtube.com. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3tmXlzuqqc>

plays on masculinity's traditional role of breadwinning and defines Trump's value in terms of his professional success rather than his moral character or public service credentials. Taken as a whole, the collection of emasculating memes begs his mostly straight, White, cis gendered, traditionally masculine base to ask themselves if this is really who they want representing their world view on the international stage.



Figure 8.6



Figure 8.7



Figure 8.8

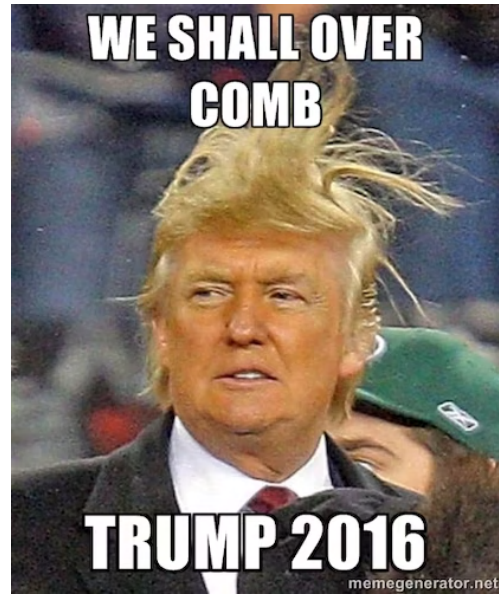


Figure 8.9



Figure 8.10



Figure 8.11

In 2016 Colin Kaepernick, quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, refused to stand for the playing of the National Anthem at a football game in protest of the unfair treatment of Black Americans by the police and other institutions in the United States. The controversy made national headlines and garnered the ire of Trump and his base across many social media platforms. A series of memes emerged shortly after that sought to humiliate, intimidate, and emasculate him. Trump's goal was to rile up his base just before the November election by subordinating non White masculinity and presenting Kaepernick as a liberal "snowflake" who was unappreciative of his own privilege and disrespectful of military servicemen who fought under the flag.

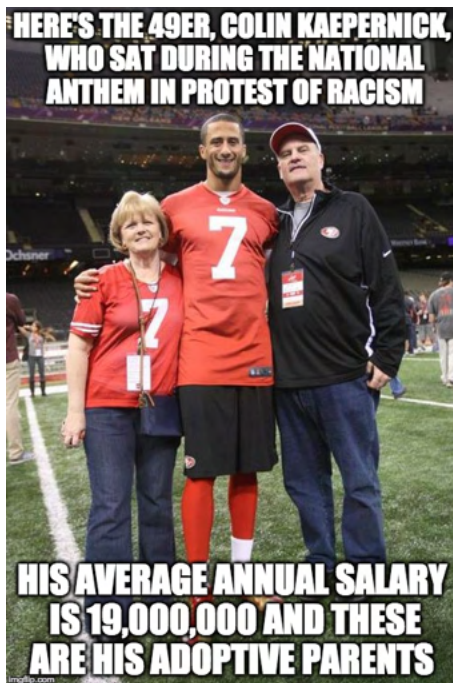


Figure 8.12

Just How UNGRATEFUL Can One American Be?



Lashes Out at White Adoptive Parents, Accuses Them of "Perpetuating Racism"
Be Grateful and Not Hateful For Your Country & Your Parents!
imgflip.com

Figure 8.13

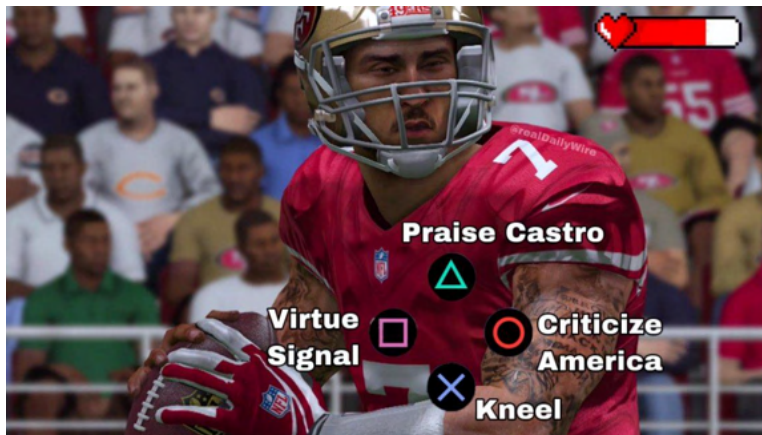


Figure 8.14

Kaepernick's goal with his protest was to shed light on racial inequalities that permeate his country but Trump was able to successfully hijack this conversation to fuel divisions. The memes around the Kaepernick scandal "facilitate an identification with a form of U.S. patriotism and citizenship that centers a White heterosexual masculinity as the embodiment, defender, and moral compasses of the nation." (Dickerson, Hoddler 2021 p. 331) This was especially true in the post 9/11 world where the discourse around patriotism demanded an uncritical and unquestioning support of American troops abroad. Figure 8.14 illustrates this accusation of unpatriotism and inauthenticity.

The strong connection between football and the American military is not new. Mia Fischer (2014) wrote that the connection is so deep it can be thought of as a "sports-media-military-entertainment complex". She continues, "Football is clearly a territorial sport driven by the invasion or defense of one's home turf." (p. 203) After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 there was a dramatic increase in expressions of national unity with American flags on display everywhere and *especially* at sporting events. Lee and Brewer (2004) write that the tone of national identification post 9/11 moved swiftly from patriotism, defined as a love and identification with one's own country, to nationalism, defined by a belief that one's own country is superior to others and has the right to domination over other nations. This was especially important as the U.S. expanded its wars in the Middle East and sought to justify itself to its citizens and to the international community. Nationalism and hegemonic masculinity intersect perfectly in sports where athleticism and physique are most on display. In

the post 9/11 world this intersection expands to nationalism, masculinity, and militarism and inextricably links all three.

This is the context in which Colin Kaepernick chose to kneel during the national anthem, a performance of nationalism in an arena that worships masculinity and treats disrespect for the flag as disrespect for the military. The memes generated in the public backlash “Utiliz[ed] Kaepernick to demonize femininity and homosexuality through racialized, gendered, and homophobic discourse result[ing] in the antithesis of these identity markers White, masculine, and heterosexual situated as the norms within sport and larger society. (Dickerson, Hoddler 2021, p. 343) The dominant group must make a public rejection of a trader in their midst to send a message that “he is not one of us” to maintain their position at the top of the social pyramid. The meme below is a crass and very direct attack on Kaepernick’s masculinity and sexuality by more than suggesting he will be penetrated sexually by the opposing team. Given football’s connection to the military, critics of Kaepernick treated his protest as a matter of national security. By making a public display of progressive attitudes he is communicating his femininity and calling into question the masculinity of the whole state. It’s not unlike the princely manuals of 17th Century England that feared a feminine king would threaten the security of the kingdom.



Figure 8.15

The 2016 election was possibly the first political campaign to feature the use of memes so heavily. Trump's brand of masculine bravado and rejection of political correctness was well suited to the punchy, humorous, and often degrading style of meme culture. Even if it often backfired against him, turning him into the butt of the joke, his supporters only used this as fuel to push the boundaries of anti P.C. culture further. Additionally, internet based media consumption moves through filters that allow audiences to segregate themselves from information they don't want to see and construct their own realities - it's entirely possible Trump's loyal base has little to no contact with meme culture that is critical of Trump or his brand of conservatism. With the emergence of near ubiquitous social media platforms, Trump was able to amplify his message far beyond traditional forms of digital communication to a specifically receptive audience and this ultimately played a hand in his victory over Hillary Clinton.

Conclusion

The history of Western society is a history of masculinity. Women's relegation to the domestic sphere gave men agency in the outside world that granted them power in politics that women have never wielded in the same way. The way masculinity looks has evolved greatly from decadent kings to austere statesmen but the ideals have remained surprisingly constant - be deadly and don't be anything like women. "All American men must...contend with a singular vision of masculinity, a particular definition that is held up as a model against which we all measure ourselves" (McMenamin 2014, p. 8) This measuring is a source of strife for men both personally and politically and leads to outrageous acts of overcompensation out of fear of losing status. Donald Trump and his supporters are just the latest manifestation of fear based rhetoric around this topic and that is why it's important to investigate the origins of masculine identity in the United States. Understanding that our collective image of the cowboy was essentially created by one dreamy painter helps defang the next politician that thinks wearing a cowboy hat means they're a "real American". Understanding the intersection of White supremacy and misogyny dismantles political ads that look more like homemade action movies.

The term masculinity is nothing but a word that describes a collection of behaviors: aggression, decisiveness, competitiveness, and logic. The goal of this thesis has not been to convince readers that these are inherently bad qualities, each has their place in a productive society and can propel individuals and nations to achieve great things. Masculinity becomes a problem when it's thought of as a privileged resource that only a fraction of the population has access to. It's a problem when leadership is thought of as good if it embodies those ideals while rejecting femininity. Femininity can be defined by compassion, cooperation, emotion, and nurturing and we've built a society that believes these qualities are inferior and the territory of women thus largely excluding them from positions of power. Men who embody femininity threaten the aforementioned hegemonic privileged class and are rejected and excluded in the same way. Incredible progress has been made in the last century but the backlash has been swift and intense as conservative politicians work to divide and oppress those they feel nipping at their heels.

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