The Masculine Mystique

> How could we ever really know or love each other as long as we kept play-
> ing those roles that kept us from knowing or being ourselves? Weren't men
> as well as women still locked in lonely isolation, alienation, no matter how
> many sexual acrobatics they put their bodies through? Weren't men dying
> too young, suppressing fears and tears and their own tenderness? It seemed
> to me that men weren't really the enemy—they were fellow victims, suffering
> from an outmoded masculine mystique that made them feel unnecessarily
> inadequate when there were no bears to kill.
> —Betty Friedan *The Feminine Mystique* (1973)[1]

In 1963 Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* resounded like a tocsin across the country, heralding the birth of a new wave of feminism. In June of that same year, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered perhaps his most impassioned plea for racial equality, inviting his audience to dream with him of a time when the "grandsons of slaves and the grandsons of slaveowners" would "sit down together at the table of brotherhood."

There were even a few rumblings of discontent among men, rumblings which grew louder and more insistent as the decade progressed. The historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. noticed it in an article in *Esquire* in November 1958:

> What has happened to the American male? For a long time he seemed utterly confident in
> his manhood, sure of his masculine role in society, easy and definite in his sense of sexual
> identity. Today men are more and more conscious of maleness not as a fact but as a prob-
> lem. The ways by which American men affirm their masculinity are uncertain and obscure.
> There are multiplying signs, indeed, that something has gone badly wrong with the
> American male's conception of himself.[2]

What had gone wrong? Actually very little was new, despite Schlesinger's anxious warning. Rather, the eminent historian had indulged in a bit of ahistorical nostalgia, as we often do during periods of uncertainty, suggesting that earlier times were happier, easier, and more stable times. As I've shown, this was a projection; those bygone days came weighted with their own gendered anxieties.

In the 1960s the "masculine mystique"—that impossible synthesis of sober, responsible breadwinner, imperviously stoic master of his fate, and swashbuckling hero— was finally exposed as a fraud. The constant search for some masculine terra firma upon which to ground a stable identity had never provided firm footing for Self-Made Men; by

Manhood in America

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the 1960s gradual erosion and uneasy footing had become a landslide. All the marginalized groups whose suppression had been thought to be necessary for men to build secure identities began to rebel. Friedan had finally named the "problem that has no name"—the confusion, self-blame, and anguish of women who had been told "to seek fulfillment as wives and mothers." For the second time in our history, women began to find their voices. At first, Friedan noticed, women spoke with "a tone of quiet desperation" about their problems, the same quiet desperation that Thoreau had observed among American men a century earlier. But soon that muted tone gave way to righteous indignation, as women were finally answering that old saw about what they wanted that Freud and countless other men had asked in bemused resignation. "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home" was the answer Friedan exclaimed we could no longer ignore.[3]

The civil rights movement challenged the exclusion of black people from full citizenship and, thus, the exclusion of black men from claiming their stake in American manhood. Gender images saturated militant black rhetoric, equating the demands for civil rights with a demand for full recognition of blacks as men. The gay liberation movement challenged the facile and false equation of homosexuality with failed gender identity, the popular misperception that gay men were not real men. And the counterculture, populated largely by the sons and daughters of the white middle class, challenged the illusions of suburban comfort and security. In a sense, the hippies represented another revolt of the sons against the fathers. In their long hair and flowing, feminine clothes, hippies rejected the corporate clone as a model for manhood. "Are You a Boy or Are You a Girl?" was the title of one popular song and the plaint of many a suburban parent.[4]

Even our earlier attempts to extend the frontier beyond national boundaries could no longer be relied upon. Despite JFK's inaugural promise of a New Frontier, the world was getting smaller, closing in on men seeking military heroism as a way to demonstrate manhood. By the middle of the decade, as we sank deeper and deeper in that morally indefensible political quagmire in Vietnam, many Americans came to realize that extending the frontier had consequences: The empire was striking back. And one of the most reliable refuges for beleaguered masculinity, the soldier/protector, fell into such disrepute as the news about Vietnam filtered home that even today Vietnam veterans are seen by some as having acted out an excessive and false hypermasculinity. Once a paragon of manly virtue, the soldier was now also coming to be perceived as a failed man.

The sustained, insisted demands for inclusion by those who have historically been marginalized did not begin in the 1960s, but it then became a permanent fixture in the national social and political agenda. And whether one welcomes them today to full economic, social, and political equality as the fulfillment of democracy's promise or dreads them with all the self-righteous indignation of the traditionally privileged, these groups are here to stay. They trumpet neither reveille for the Age of Aquarius nor taps for American culture, but they have irreversibly transformed the landscape on which American men have sought to test and prove their manhood.

Just as they had for over a century, many American men didn't take these new challenges particularly well, retreating to tired formulae of exclusion or escape. By the mid-1970s there were calls for "men's liberation" to free men from the restrictive roles to which they had been assigned. Men, it turned out, needed liberating, too. If middle-class white men couldn't beat 'em, perhaps they could join blacks, gays, and women in the ranks of the oppressed.

Work

After all, the breadwinner role brought few of its anticipated rewards. By the 1960s American men felt increasingly alienated, stuck in a rut, unable to escape the dull monotony of a cookie-cutter corporate identity, a suit that was ready-made and waiting to be filled. These feelings resonated through all levels of American society, as successful businessmen, middle-class managers, and blue-collar workers all experienced alienation. The sociologist Robert Blauner's important study of factory workers, *Alienation and Freedom* (1964), identified several dimensions of alienation that were as pervasive for middle-class men as they were for blue-collar workers. Blauner argued that the experience of powerlessness (having no control over their actions on the job), meaninglessness (performing specialized tasks that they cannot relate to the whole), isolation (inability to identify with the firm or its goals), and self-estrangement (the lack of integration between their work and other aspects of life) led men to search for affirmation and identity outside the workplace, in the realm of consumption.[5]

It wasn't only industrial workers. A 1963 study of big business leaders asked:

> What is the point at which these men can stop, look back, and announce to themselves and their world that they have completed this long journey, that they will rest now? There does not seem to be such a point, for an essential part of the system is the need for the constant demonstration of one's adequacy, for reiterated proof of one's independence.[6]

And a Connecticut therapist described a middle-level manager at IBM:

> He's under constant fear and tension. He's constantly worried about whether he's going to get ahead or isn't he? He's not worried about being dropped, but he's very worried about what people are thinking about him. He's been with IBM for something like eight years, and he hasn't moved ahead. He's putting the pressure on himself. It's him in relation to the society of IBM. He's afraid of taking the risk of getting a promotion, afraid he might not be able to handle the new responsibilities. He's also afraid of the competition. His idea is that if he fails, he'll look worse than if he didn't try at all. So he doesn't try. The failure becomes much more difficult for him to handle.

The pressure to be a successful breadwinner was a source of strain and conflict, not pride and motivation.[7]

In the 1960s the relentless striving and competition that had defined the Self-Made Man and the fears and anxieties that accompanied him were cast as the problem, not the cure. Self-making was now characterized as a disease, the type A personality—that impatient, driven, hostile, and competitive workplace successmonger, who, according to cardiologists, was far more prone to heart attacks and other stress-related diseases than his more calmly cooperative and accommodating type B brother. Immediately seized upon by psychologists and magazine writers, the type A man was, according to a *Business Week* article in 1964, "aggressive, hard-driving, vigorously competitive, continuously subject to deadline, and [subject to] an exaggerated sense of time urgency," while another observer saw his "restlessness, hyperalertness, explosiveness of speech, tenseness of facial musculature" as early warning signs of type A.[8] A 1974 study of one thousand seven hundred

people over age eighty, including 129 people who were one hundred years old or older, found absolutely no "intense, driving, highly competitive business executive types in the whole bunch."[9] Literally sick at heart, Self-Made American men were driving themselves to early death.

Such relentless striving in the competitive crowd left men feeling isolated and alone. Loneliness, emptiness—these became the dominant terms in the era's cultural analyses of masculinity. The breadwinner role left men feeling like cogs in the corporate machine, and conspicuous consumption in sprawling suburban shopping malls was hardly a compensation. The pursuit of happiness promised by our Founding Fathers had become, as Philip Slater's compact indictment was titled, a "pursuit of loneliness"; our growing into manhood was, as Paul Goodman's equally insightful work had been titled a decade earlier, "growing up absurd"; and the culture of abundance was now what Christopher Lasch called a "culture of narcissism."

Each of these works brilliantly dissected the cultural malaise that lay at the heart of American self-making, the empty anxiety that sprang directly from the blind pursuit of a marketplace masculinity. The rugged individualism of the nineteenth century had been replaced by the shallow sociability of the modern American personality. Eagerly dependent upon the approval of others, the contemporary narcissist was not a gentle neo-hippy but a competitive, insecure manipulator. We could no longer have it both ways, Goodman had warned, maintaining "a conformist and ignoble system *and* . . . skillful and spirited men to man that system with."[10]

Only Charles Reich, in *The Greening of America* (1970), waxed optimistic in the face of these changes. To Reich, a Yale Law School professor, the cultural crisis was the dawning of a new age, in part exemplified by the hippies, and the new age signaled the birth of a new man. Reich's truncated history of America rested on the transitions in forms of consciousness. In republican America (what Reich called Consciousness I) small businessmen and farmers, heirs to republicanism and frontier individualism, carved out the manhood of what I have called the Heroic Artisan, characterized by the Jeffersonian virtues of the yeoman and the autonomous shopkeeper. The turn of the century spelled the triumph of the organization man, the professional animated by hierarchy, marketplace rationality, and order (Consciousness II—roughly equivalent to what I have called Self-Made Masculinity.) But now (the late 1960s) Reich euphorically observed a new consciousness, Consciousness III, which replaced liberal marketplace individualism with a globally aware, environmentally sensitive, freely flowing androgynous cultural identity. Reich's breathless celebration of Consciousness III may have been premature, but his insight that hordes of American men were seeking to shed the burdens of preceding forms of consciousness suggested something significant in American culture.[11]

Politics

The emerging student movement also was uneasy about the possibilities for personal fulfillment promised by Self-Made Masculinity. The Port Huron Statement (1962), the founding document of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), is an anxious plea for a new definition of manhood. Contemporary society used men, treated them as "thing[s] to be manipulated . . . inherently incapable of directing [their] own affairs"; we had become docile and dependent. But the solution was not "egotistic individualism," which led only

to "loneliness, estrangement, [and] isolation," but rather the exploration of our "unfulfilled capacities for reason, freedom and love" and our "unrealized potential for self-evaluation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity."[12]

For many young Americans, before personal fulfillment came a commitment to ending the war in Vietnam. The growing antiwar movement provided a new lens into the dynamics of American manhood in the 1960s and 1970s; the conflict between old and young, between hawks and doves, was also a test of wills; questions of loyalty became questions of standing up for what one believed. It was a central expression of the growing crisis of masculinity.

The struggle between the Vietnam policy makers and the antiwar protestors held the gendered psyches of Washington policy makers up to a new lens. No longer did we lionize presidents and their cabinets as they stood fast against aggression, totalitarianism, and imperial expansion. Kennedy was, perhaps, the last president cast in that heroic mold, even though recent revisionist historians have significantly tarnished his image. Like both Roosevelts, Kennedy overcame the perceived burdens of his aristocratic family lineage and youthful infirmity or injury—a World War II hero on PT-109, Kennedy presented a youthful vigor, a hardy manhood that, despite his chronic back injury, made him as comfortable sailing or playing touch football with his family on the lawns of their Hyannisport home as he was leading the nation into the New Frontier. The shock wave that jolted the American psyche when Kennedy was assassinated in 1963 was, in part, that a man in the prime of his life, so vital and active, had been cut down by a sniper's bullet (or snipers' bullets). If Kennedy could be shot down, then the manhood he embodied was itself vulnerable.

The re-creation of the frontier loomed large in JFK's imagery. In his speech accepting the Democratic presidential nomination in 1960 in Los Angeles, Kennedy evoked the search for the frontier as the source of renewal and hope:

> I stand tonight facing west on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretch 3,000 miles behind me, the pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build a new world here in the West. . . . [But] the problems are not all solved and the battles are not all won, and we stand today on the edge of a new frontier—the frontier of the 1960s, a frontier of unknown opportunities and paths, a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats.[13]

New frontier boundaries were drawn against communism and especially against the Russians—whether in the rice paddies of Vietnam, in building American bodies (through the President's Council on Physical Fitness), or in the space race. Exploring outer space offered the chance to win a war against the Russians without earthbound weapons and physical injury, and it also offered some new versions of American heroes. The astronaut was "the triumphant single-combat warrior," the "Cold Warrior of the Heavens," facing a challenge that was "ancient, primordial, irresistible," according to Tom Wolfe in his meditation on military masculinity couched as a portrait of aeronautical disillusionment, *The Right Stuff* (1979). Wolfe suggests that the astronauts, instead of being the triumphant reincarnation of the Heroic Artisan, were actually glamorized proletarians; each was little more than a passenger in his capsule—"a redundant component, a backup engineer, a boiler room attendant—in an automated system!"[14]

Kennedy's constant confrontations, both real and symbolic, with the Russians revealed a sense of manliness that was animated by a "keyed up, almost compulsive competitiveness," according to biographer Theodore Sorenson. Assembling around him the "best and the brightest," Kennedy saw many of his brief administration's tests as tests of manly resolve, from the Bay of Pigs crisis, to his own Vietnam policies, which began the rapid escalations of U.S. involvement. This foreign policy's aim, according to James McNaughton, assistant to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, was "70 percent—to avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat (to our reputation as guarantor) . . . 20 percent—to keep South Vietnam (and the adjacent territory) from Chinese hands . . . 10 percent to permit the people, of South Vietnam to enjoy a better, freer way of life."[15]

Kennedy managed to balance his compulsive competitiveness and aggression with a fresh-scrubbed handsome, energetic charisma—qualities that LBJ lacked in equal abundance. Johnson appears to have been so deeply insecure that his political rhetoric dripped with metaphors of aggressive masculinity; affairs of state seem to have been conducted as much with the genitals as with political genius. There was a lot at stake for LBJ, as David Halberstam noted in his monumental study, *The Best and the Brightest*:

> He has always been haunted by the idea that he would be judged as being insufficiently manly for the job, that he would lack courage at a crucial moment. More than a little insecure himself, he wanted very much to be seen as a man; it was a conscious thing. . . . [H]e wanted the respect of men who were tough, real men, and they would turn out to be hawks. He had unconsciously divided people around him between men and boys. Men were activists, doers, who conquered business empires, who acted instead of talked, who made it in the world of other men and had the respect of other men. Boys were the talkers and the writers and the intellectuals, who sat around thinking and criticizing and doubting instead of doing.[16]

Johnson's crisis of manliness contributed to, though of course it did not cause, the escalation of the war in Vietnam, his refusal to admit that the war was lost, or to see the error in the war in the first place. Bill Moyers, then President Johnson's press secretary, recalled that the president told him of his fear that if he withdrew from Vietnam, then McNamara and the other advisers would think him "less of a man" than Kennedy. When opposed by enemies real or imagined, Johnson questioned their manhood. "In decision making," Halberstam writes, "they proposed the manhood position, their opponents the softer, or sissy, positions." When informed that one member of his administration was becoming a dove on Vietnam, Johnson retorted, "Hell, he has to squat to piss." And as he celebrated the Christmas bombings of North Vietnam in 1966, Johnson declared proudly, "I didn't just screw Ho Chi Minh. I cut his pecker off." As Moyers noted, it was as if the war had become "a frontier test," with LBJ swearing, "by God I'm not going to let those puny brown people push me around."[17]

Nixon, too, was chronically afraid of appearing soft on communism—or on anything else. He was "afraid of being acted upon, of being inactive, of being soft, of being thought impotent, of being dependent on anyone else."[18] Nixon resolved to "overcome the weak-kneed, jelly backed attitude" of Congress and to press ahead with escalating the war in Vietnam, according to Barry Goldwater. When one Republican senator shifted his position on the war from hawk to dove, Vice President Agnew called him Christine Jorgensen, in

reference to the most famous transsexual of the era. And in labeling antiwar protestors "effete intellectual snobs" and the press "nattering nabobs of negativism," speechwriter William Safire allowed Agnew to place into common currency the equation of manhood with support of the American war effort. Nixon's compulsive manhood formed an explosive amalgam with his political paranoia as he faced George McGovern, a soft-spoken ex-minister and college professor and the antiwar, Democratic presidential candidate in 1972. Nixon's desperate efforts to win, including the Watergate break-in and cover-up, eventually brought him down and, with him, the nation's failed Vietnam policy.

In a sense, the Carter presidency was McGovern's vindication—here was another soft-spoken, deeply religious man, who made compassion and concern the apparent cornerstone principles of his domestic and foreign policy. But the "new man" represented by Carter proved to be a case of too much too soon for an American psyche still traumatized by defeat in Vietnam, the women's movement, and the relentless grind of urban problems. As the president in the resurgently masculinist 1980s, former actor Ronald Reagan would promise one last swing in the saddle for the western cowboy hero as president—and most Americans went happily along for the ride.

The erosion of confidence in a masculinity based on martial virtues that attended our involvement in Vietnam was only part of the problem for American men in the 1960s and 1970s. Men were besieged at home; the social movements of those two decades—the women's movement, the civil rights movement, and the gay liberation movement—all offered scathing critiques of traditional masculinity and demanded inclusion and equality in the public arena. No longer could the marketplace and the political arena be the preserve of heterosexual white men. The very groups who had been so long excluded from American life were making their own claims for identity. And for manhood.

Black men, for example. James Baldwin's powerful essays and best-selling novels focused a tormented rage on white men's projections of their fears and longings on black men, a cultural psychosis that meant that the black man was "forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it."[19]

As the civil rights movement of the mid-1960s enlarged to include movements for black power and black pride, so too did the rhetoric of gender. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., asked America to live up to the promise of democracy by integrating and including black people into full humanity. In the 1968 sanitation workers' strike in Memphis, during which King was assassinated, workers carried signs that read, in bold block letters, "I *am* a man." Malcolm X developed a parallel political rhetoric that was equally gendered, as he spoke about reclaiming a manhood stolen from black men by white slavers and denied by two centuries of racist politics. "Malcolm was our manhood, our living black manhood!" exclaimed the actor and civil rights leader Ossie Davis, in the aftermath of Malcolm X's assassination. "This was his meaning to his people."

The Black Panther party, a militantly defiant organization, made black manhood a centerpiece of its appeal to young blacks. In the works of such Black Panther leaders as Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and Eldridge Cleaver, there was a growing preoccupation with proving a manhood long suppressed and denied by racism. "We shall have our manhood. We shall have it or the earth will be leveled by our attempts to gain it," wrote Cleaver in *Soul on Ice* (1968), his incendiary manifesto of black liberation. The sight of hundreds of angry black men in military formations, carrying machine guns, preparing to fight for their rights, was a stirring sight to all who observed the Black Panthers—no

doubt a terrifying sight to some but, also no doubt, an inspiring sight to many young black men facing the crippling realities of racism, unemployment, and inner-city poverty.[20]

For some militants black pride meant pride in themselves as men, which led them to fuse their own homophobia with claims for manhood. "Most American white men are trained to be fags," with "weak and blank" faces with a "red flush" and "silk blue faggot eyes," asserted Amiri Baraka in his essay "American sexual reference: black male."[21] More than any of the others, Cleaver was preoccupied with black power as the vehicle to reclaim sexual potency. In an essay, "To All Black Women from All Black Men," Cleaver wrote about his struggle to "heal my castration"—the deep wound inflicted on black men through slavery and cultural dispossession. "Across the naked abyss of negated masculinity, of four hundred years minus my Balls . . . I feel a deep terrifying hurt, the pain of humiliation of a vanquished warrior . . . and a compelling challenge to redeem my conquered manhood." One of Cleaver's ideas of revolution was the rape of white women by black men, since such a violation was the ultimate violation of white male power. By raping "his" women, black men would be striking the ultimate blow against the white man. Such suggestions did not sit well with either his black sisters or with white women, who were themselves demanding that they cease to be the chattel of men.[22]

Women had a movement of their own for that purpose. Feminism posed perhaps the greatest challenge to a masculinity based on exclusion and affected men both personally and politically. For one thing, women had burst into public realms in sufficient numbers to really challenge the workplace, the classroom, and the political arena as homosocial preserves. For example, between 1968 and 1975 all but a small number of colleges and universities were opened to women—only a handful of college-educated American men currently under thirty-five has attended a single-sex institution of higher learning. That's quite a change from the experiences of every other generation of men in U.S. history. Women were not only voting but voting for women candidates and supporting the ERA. In 1973 the Supreme Court ruled in *Roe v. Wade* that women have the right to choose to terminate a pregnancy, thus allowing women to maintain control over their bodies—a right that men had been assuming for themselves since the Founding Fathers guaranteed men a sense of property in their own person.

Feminism also insisted that the women who were the victims of abusive masculinity —the battered wives, the abandoned families, the sexually abused young girls, the rape victims—be protected from men's violence and that the government institute policies to protect women from rape, sexual harassment, battery. At the same time as feminism demanded protection for victims, it also empowered women to claim autonomy in their personal lives, especially in interpersonal relationships with men. Women not only had the right to work but the right to sexual agency, a right to desire itself—perhaps, even, a right to orgasm. (The invention of the birth control pill provided technical assistance to women and men who wanted to claim sexual pleasure independent of procreation.) Women had the right to choose the kinds of lives they wanted to lead. No longer to be consigned to housework and child care, women could *choose* to be mothers, to have careers, to work around the home. As the Statement of Purpose of the National Organization for Women put it in 1966:

We reject the current assumptions that a man must carry the sole burden of supporting himself, his wife, and family, and that a woman is automatically entitled to lifelong
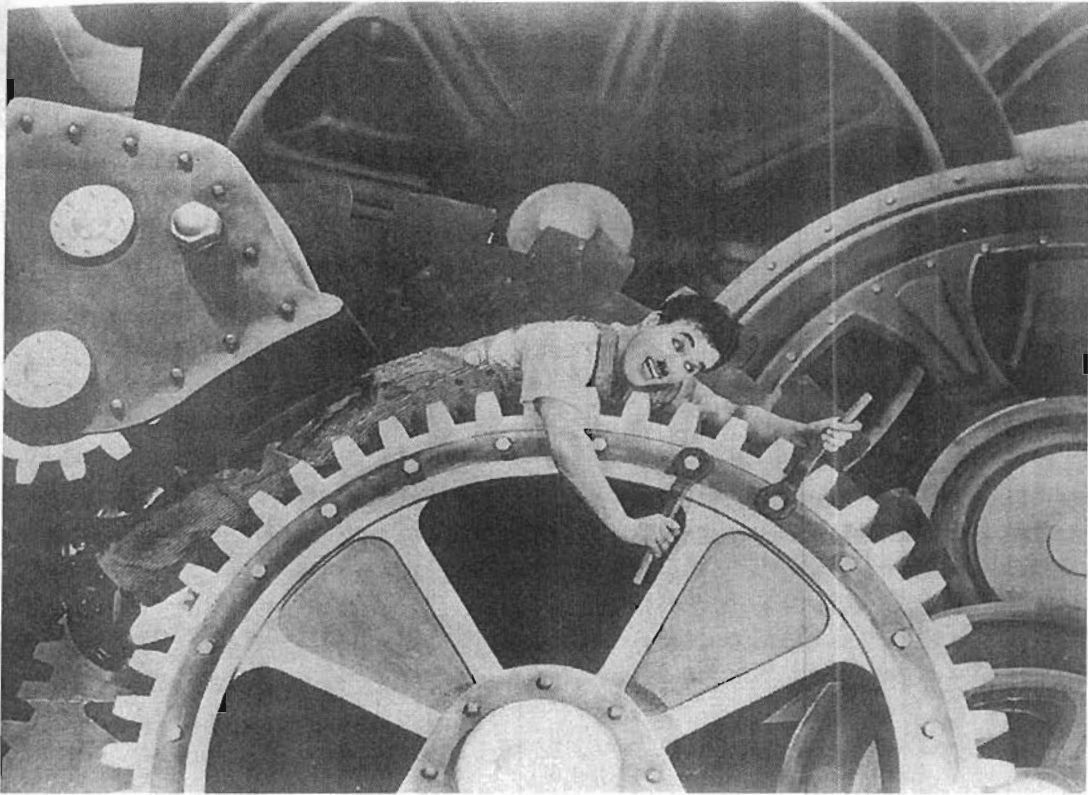
The Unmaking of the Self-Made Man: In the first decades of the twentieth century, former Heroic Artisans found themselves increasingly proletarianized, mere appendages to the machine. The world of work was increasingly competitive and crowded. *Top*: Charlie Chaplin as dispossessed worker in *Modern Times* (1936). *Bottom*: Police exam, New York City, 1931. (Photo courtesy of Bettman Archives)

Restoring Masculinity by Remaking the Body:
Turn-of-the-century America went "sports crazy,"
as thousands of men sought to combat the
enervating effects of their urban white-collar
working lives with manly physiques, health
regimens, and participation in sports. Muscular
development revealed a Self-Made Man. The first
professional bodybuilder, Eugen Sandow, used his
sculpted body to become one of the world's most
famous and wealthy men. Bernarr Macfadden
promoted it all in his magazine *Physical Culture*,
from muscle building, to clean living and healthy
diet, to a "peniscope," a vacuum pump designed
to enlarge the male organ. *Right:* Eugen Sandow.
Bottom: Bernarr Macfadden. (Frontispiece from
The Virile Powers of Superb Manhood by Bernarr
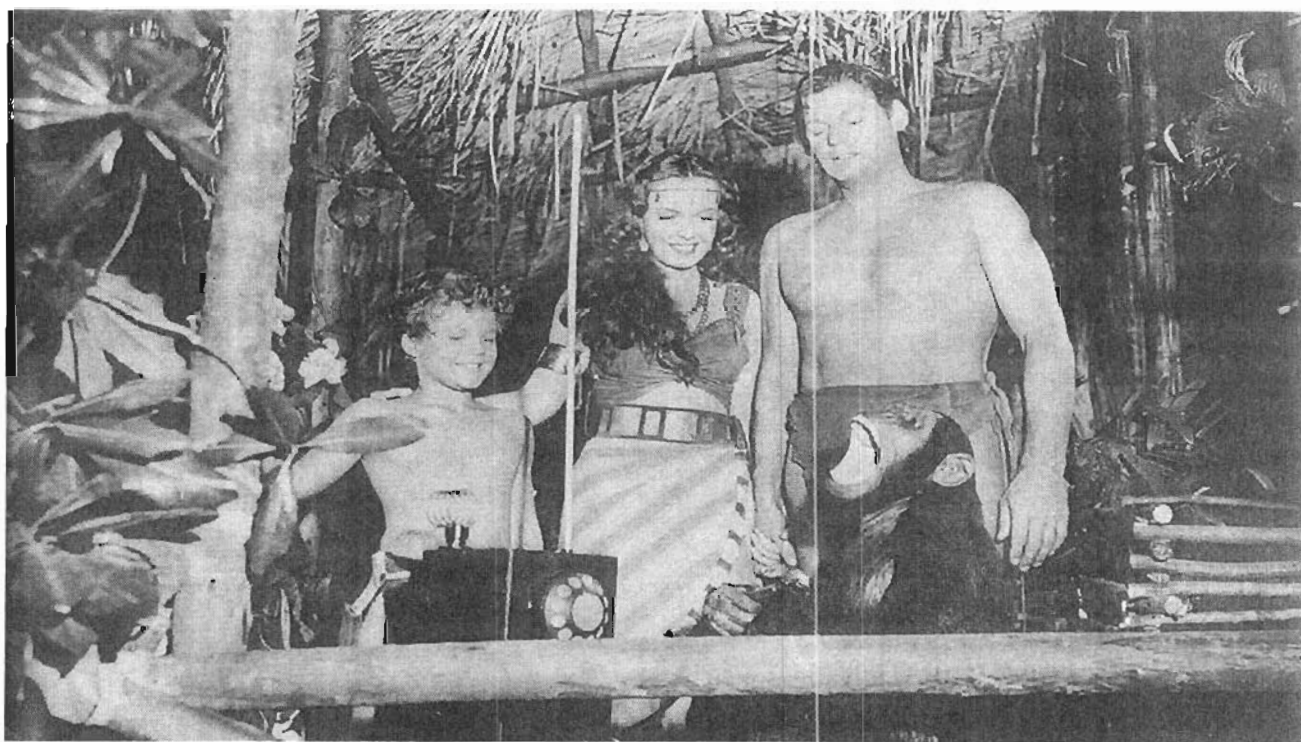Macfadden [New York: Physical Culture Publishing
Company, 1900])
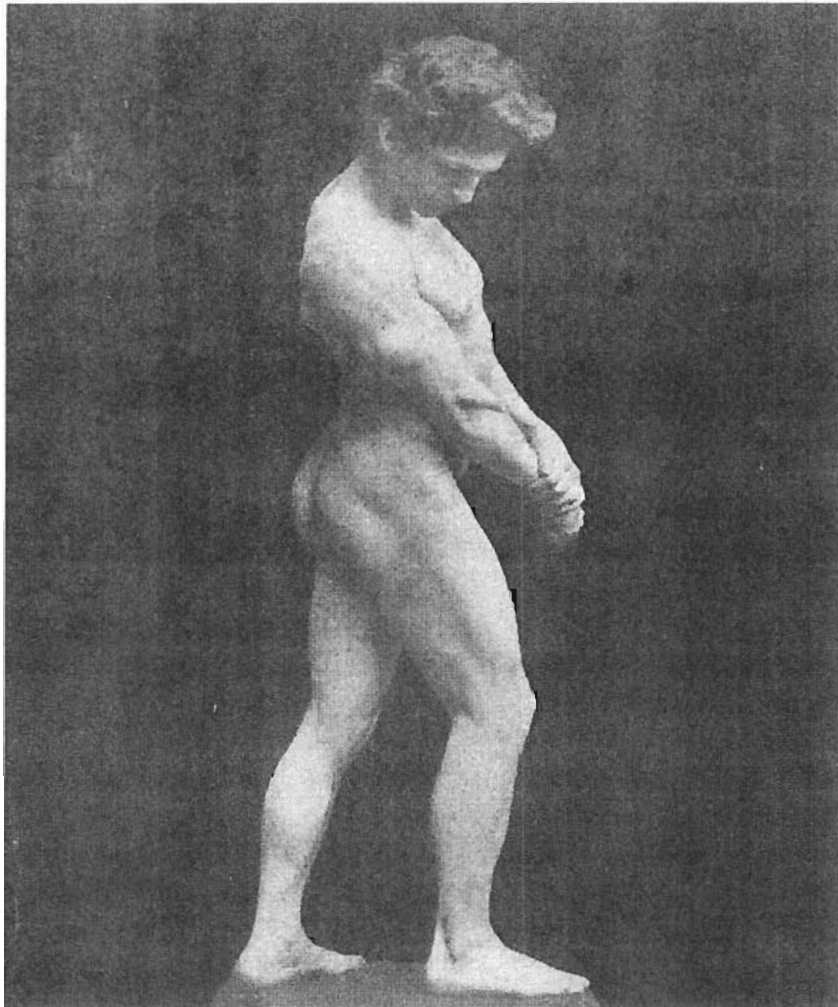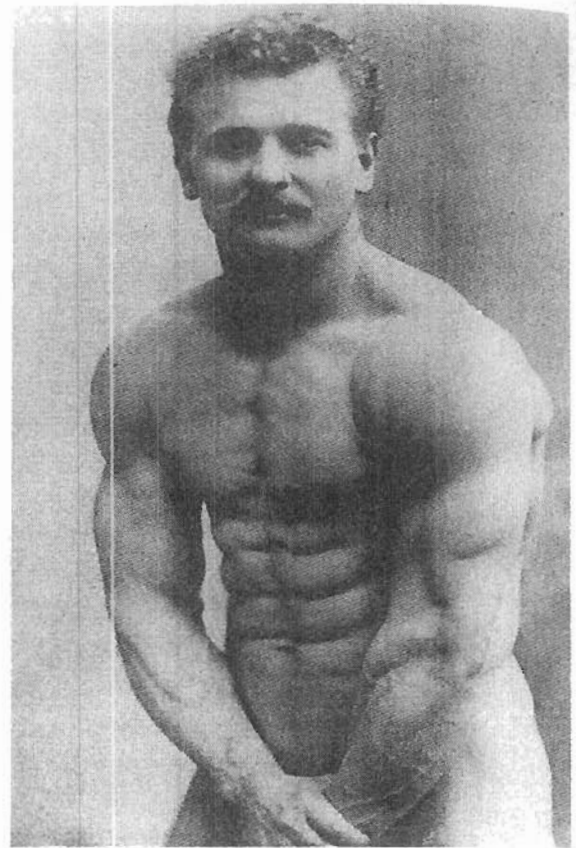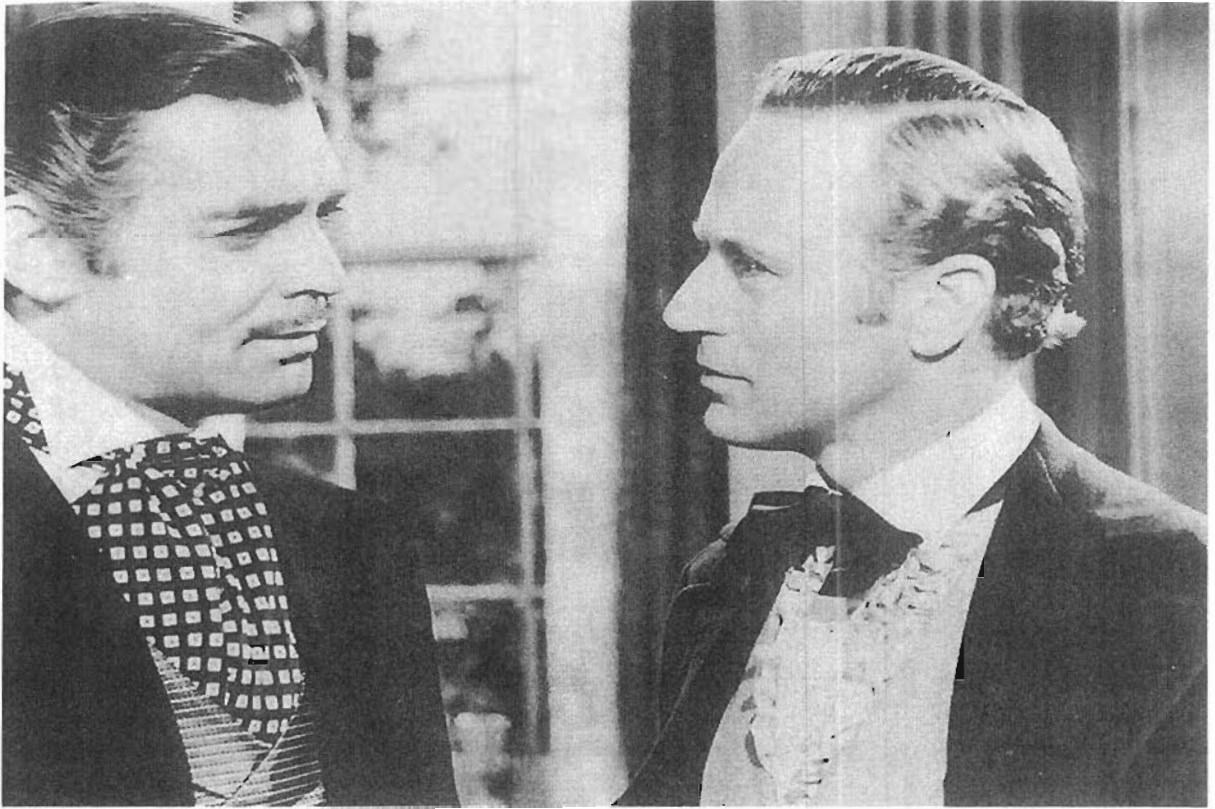
Restoring Twentieth-Century Manhood: Depicting a rogue, conniver, and self-interested scoundrel, Rhett Butler revived southern manhood, in contrast to Leslie Howard's aristocratic cavalier, who was now gone with the wind. In the 1950s, the self-made man returned as a bit of an aristocratic dandy in the image of the Playboy. With his smoking jacket, Danish modern furniture, and cigarette holder, the Playboy was neither a sexualized scamp nor working class hero, as the frontispiece illustration for the first issue of the magazine suggests. His idea was to invite a woman over to his well-appointed apartment for "a quiet discussion on Picasso, Nietzsche, jazz, and sex." *Top*: Studio still from *Gone With the Wind*, 1939. *Bottom*: Frontispiece, *Playboy*, December 1953; reprinted with permission of *Playboy* magazine.
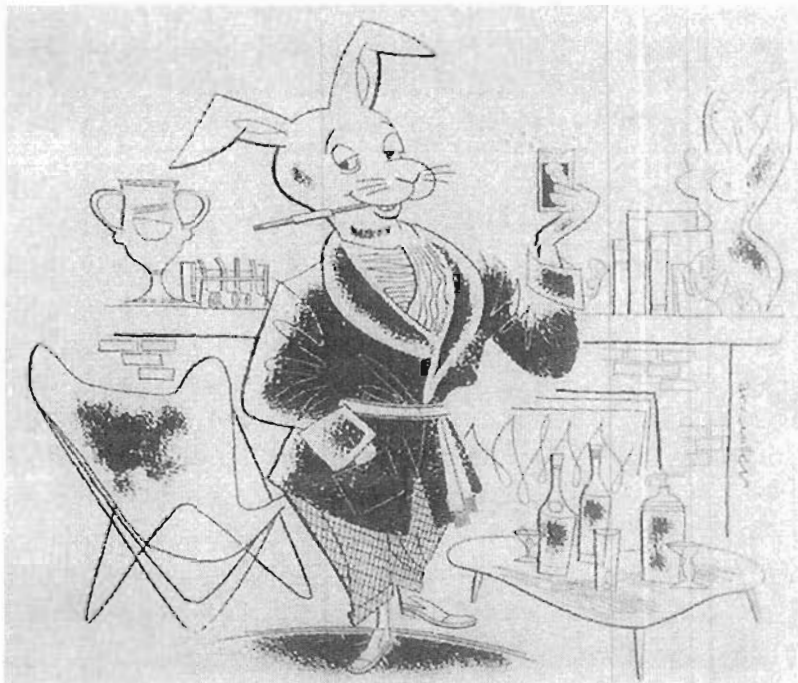
Television Restores Domestic Patriarchy: As "family entertainment," watched in the "family room," early television shows reestablished the centrality of the father in the family, even as suburban men's working lives were increasingly distant from the home. That father was reinserted as the family's center of gravity held true whether they lived in a suburban development or in the jungle. *Top*: *Father Knows Best* replaces mom with dad. (Publicity photograph) *Bottom*: Tarzan and Jane recreate the nuclear family. (Publicity photograph)

Muscles Continue to Make the Man: Physical strength, once of significance in the real world, maintains profound symbolic importance in the making of Self-Made Men. Charles Atlas made a fortune promising to transform 97-pound weaklings into he-men, as have scores of his heirs to the muscle-building industry. At the Academy Awards presentation in 1992, Jack Palance showed that, despite his age, he was still man enough. *Right*: Charles Atlas advertisement. *Bottom*: Jack Palance does a set of one-armed push-ups after his acceptance speech for Best Supporting Actor at the Academy Awards presentation, 1992. (Courtesy of Reuters/Bettman)
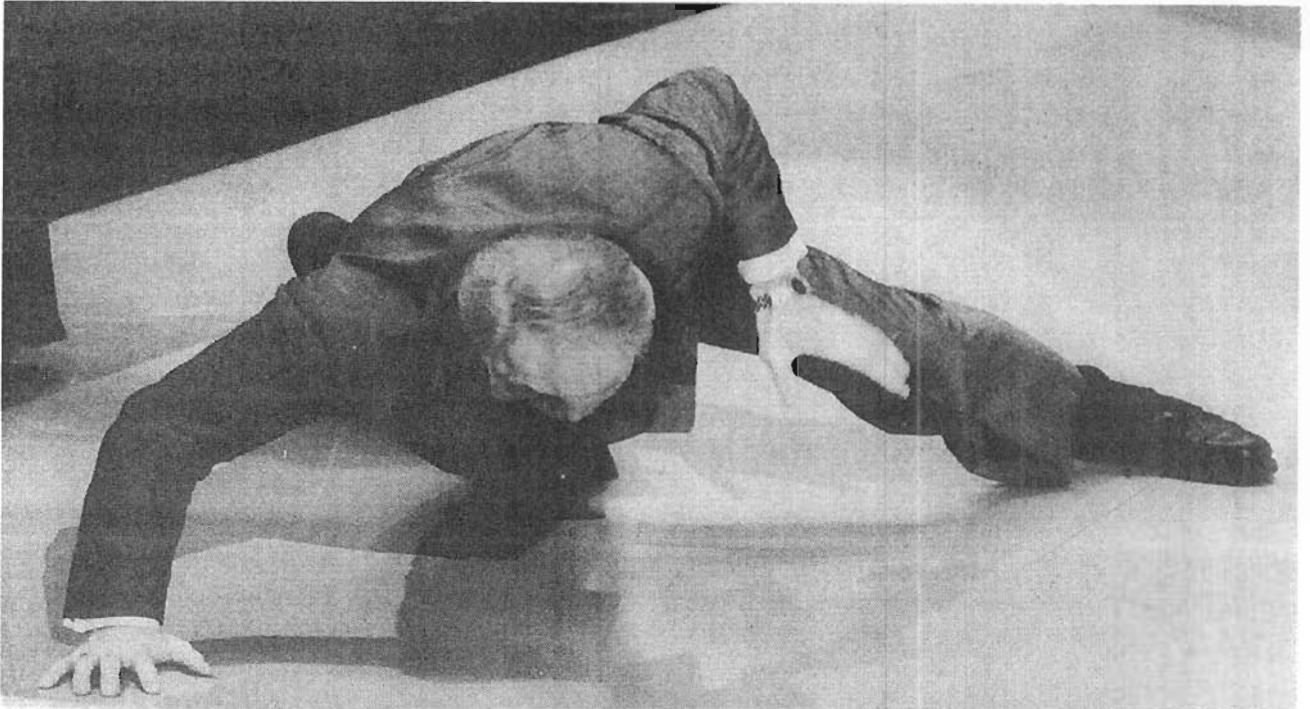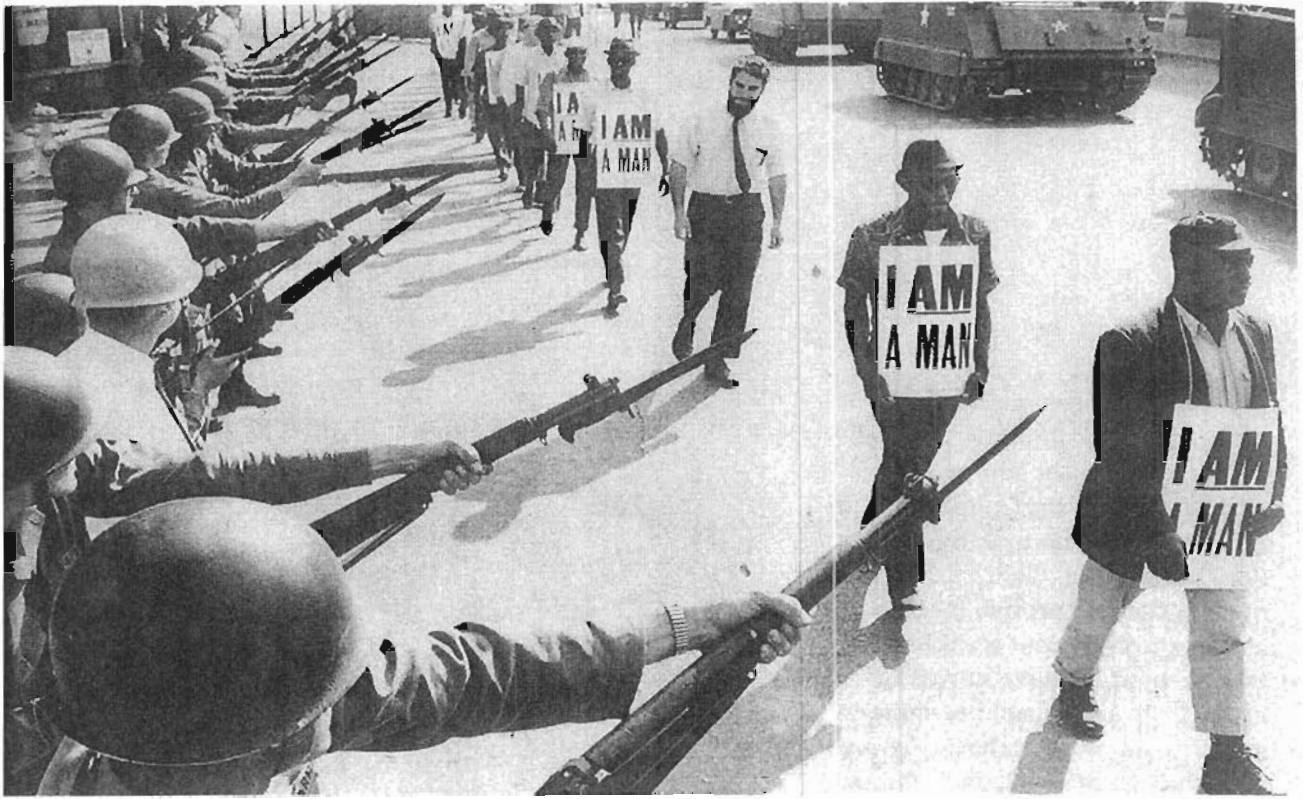
Expanding the Definition of Contemporary Manhood: The contemporary era has witnessed a constant challenge to a definition of masculinity based on exclusion of the "other"—women, gay men, black men, ethnic immigrants. And some men have challenged the behavioral restrictions that label men as "sissy." *Top*: Civil rights workers proclaim their manhood, Memphis, 29 March 1968. (Courtesy of UPI/Bettman Newsphotos). *Bottom*: Bruce Springsteen and Clarence Clemons, 1990. (Photo by Ebet Roberts; reprinted with permission)

Boys and their Toys.
Contemporary self-making often requires dramatic re-invention. *Left:* A shy Midwesterner, Marion Michael Morrison, transformed himself into John Wayne, the most readily identifiable masculine icon of the decades following World War II. (Publicity photograph) *Bottom:* And President George W. Bush, son and grandson of aristocratic New England bluebloods, who prepped at Andover, graduated from Yale and Harvard, and "summered" in Kennebunkport, Maine, transformed himself into a "self-made" Texas businessman, a down-to-earth man of the people. The image of a back-country Heroic Artisan contrasts with his wife's description of him as a "windshield cowboy," meaning that he experiences the great western outdoors in his pickup truck, not riding the range. Neither he nor Wayne apparently liked horses very much. (Brooks Kraft/Corbis)
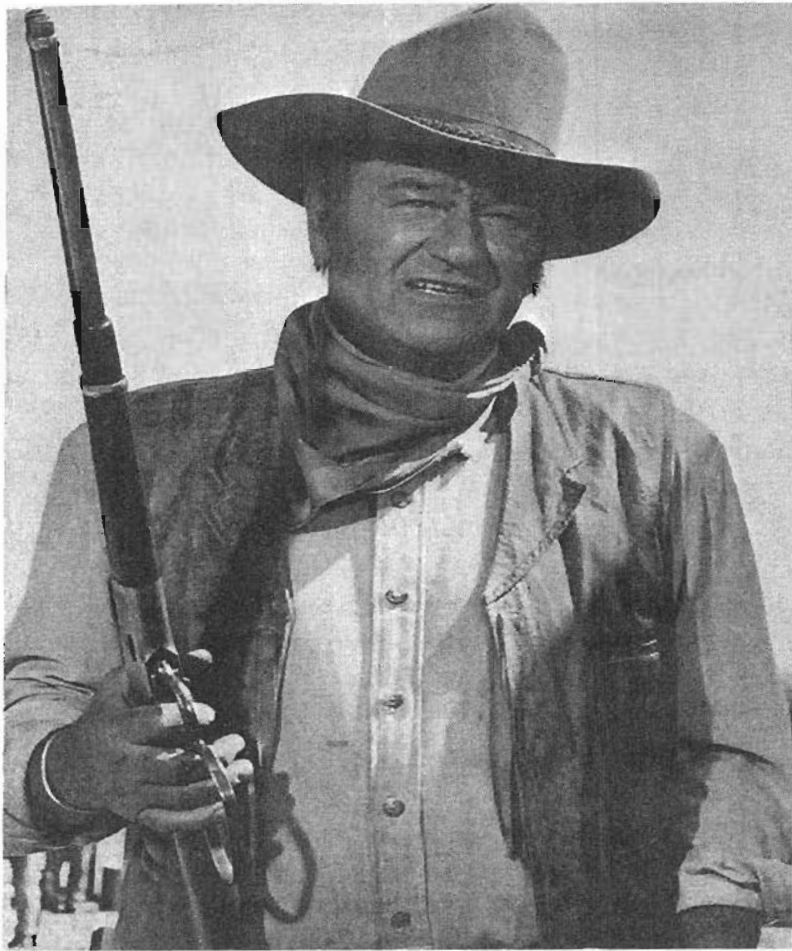
Self-Making as Lifelong Project. A small shy Austrian boy, Arnold Schwarzenegger followed the time-honored path of transforming his body in order to construct a masculine persona. *Left:* Having conquered the world of competitive body-building, he conquered Hollywood as a hypermasculine hero, whether as a primitive "barbarian" throwback, here as Conan the Barbarian, or as a futuristic muscle-bound cyborg in the "Terminator" series. (Dirck Halstead/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images) *Bottom:* Transformed again into a politician, Schwarzenegger was elected Governor of California, as someone who would be tough and firm. Once lampooned on *Saturday Night Live* as a muscle-brained oaf who disdained metrosexual "girly-men," Schwarzenegger, now as "Govemator," appropriated the line and chastised his opponents in the same way. (David Paul Morris/Getty Images)
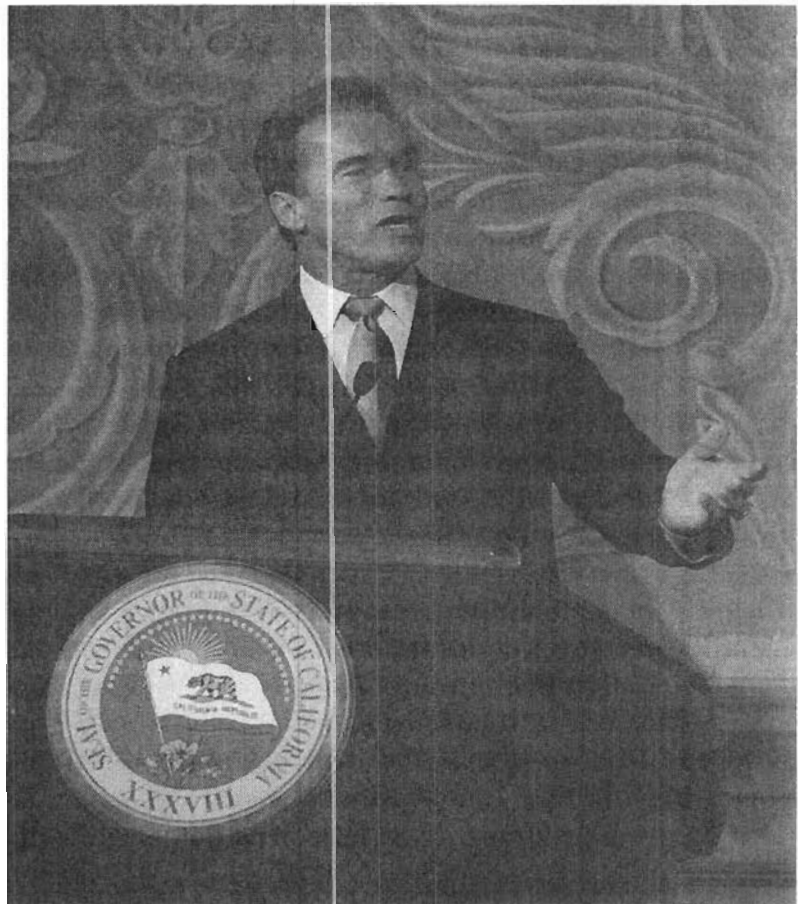
support by a man upon her marriage, or that marriage, home, and family are primarily woman's world and responsibility—hers to dominate—his to support.[23]

Of course, such sentiments had enormous implications for American men, because feminism demanded that men change—that men cease abusing, raping, and battering women, that men begin to share in the daily chores around the household, and that they accept that women were working right alongside them. For many men, women's liberation meant increased anxiety, particularly sexual anxiety. After all, if women could now be more fully sexual, then men might fear sexual activity as a constant test, a "trial of manliness" that would find men perpetually wanting, according to British observer Myron Brenton in *The American Male* (1967). Women now had the right not only to respond sexually but also to initiate sexual activity; Brenton saw American men running away, in a somewhat spiteful escape, from women's sexual desires and right into impotence, decreased desire, homosexual encounters, affairs with other women, and visits to call girls.[24]

Animated by these fears, by the antipathy for women's entry into the public sphere, and by a growing resentment of any demands that they change, many men resisted women's efforts to either open up the public sphere or to transform the private sphere. Norman Mailer's *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971), itself a response to a feminist critique of his work, turned from a defensive plea to a meandering spiteful tirade, full of bathos and bombast. Confessing to exhaustion and confusion, Mailer moved back and forth, from calling his sexual instrument "the Avenger" to wincing at the "desperate bravado" that men exhibit in their "passion to be masculine."[25]

Academic works, like sociologist Steven Goldberg's *The Inevitability of Patriarchy* (1973), marshaled a limited and selective sample of anthropological and biological evidence to claim that women's liberation ran counter to the forces of nature and cultural stability, that male domination was encoded in the superior strength of the male. Male domination was universal, Goldberg claimed, and was therefore natural.[26] Conservative political theorist George Gilder also used a putative biological argument to support antifeminist claims in his books *Sexual Suicide* (1973) and *Naked Nomads* (1974). Men, Gilder argued, were biologically driven toward aggression, competition, and violence, naturally "disposed" to crime, drugs, and violence, and naturally "susceptible" to disease, and if women followed feminist ideals, they would abandon their traditional role as moralistic constraints on men's antisocial natures, and all hell would break loose. Since men were untamable, except in their traditionally responsible roles as father, husband, and breadwinner—he cites statistics that indicate that most violent crimes are committed by young men—then women's liberation would result in an anarchistic uprising among men, who would run rampant in an orgy of violence and aggression. And sex. Male sexuality is insistent and incessant; if not harnessed by women, there will be "aimless copulation," "slaked by masturbation and pornography" or uncontrolled promiscuous homosexuality.[27]

Gilder's solution was to reestablish the pedestal and replace women firmly on top of it. Women need to leave the public sphere and return to the home where they belong and where men desperately needed them to be. Feminists are their own worst enemies; "[a] society of wealthy and independent women will be a society of sexually and economically predatory males," he predicts. While his antifeminism is obvious, more subtle is the vehement rage at men. Gilder believes that masculinity is "at bottom empty, a limp nullity. While the female body is full of internal potentiality, the male is internally barren."

Thus, men need women and society to help them define their place in the world because without women, men would be "destined to a Hobbes.an life—solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."[28]

Popular magazines and books curried masculine resentment and resistance—not only in soft-core pornography, which boomed during the 1970s (*Playboy* and *Penthouse* became two of the five top-selling magazines in the country), but also in a host of new men's magazines promising deliverance from women. In a self-promotional advertisement a newly made-over *True* magazine recalled its earlier incarnation two decades before:

> one word describes the new TRUE magazine: MACHO. The honest-to-God American MAN deserves a magazine sans naked cuties, Dr. Spock philosophies, foppish, gutless "unisex" pap, and platform shoes. It's time for a refreshing change. . . . A hardy slice of adventure, challenge, action, competition, controversy. Including informative features that bring the American man and American values back from the shadows. Back from the sterile couches of pedantic psychiatrists. Back from behind the frivolous skirts of libbers.

The ad ended with as much a threat as a promise. "If you're a man, you'll like it."[29]

Gilder and other antifeminists prescribed traditional marriage and nuclear families, with one male breadwinner and one stay-at-home female homemaker, as the solution to the male malaise. Other cultural critics worried that such arrangements would again result in the feminization of American manhood. Echoing themes from the turn of the century, the sociologist Patricia Cayo Sexton observed a general "enervating trend" in American culture—a trend directly traceable to women's monopoly over child rearing and early education. In *The Feminized Male* (1969) Sexton argued that this "overexposure to feminine norms" at home and at school was turning American boys into a weak-willed bunch of sissies, "afflicted by excessive caution and a virtual incapacity to *do* anything in the real world."[30]

Sexton based her claims on her observations at several urban schools, where it seemed that the boys who were the most academically successful consistently scored the lowest on masculinity scales, especially the still-employed Terman and Miles M-F test. School "makes sissies out of many boys and feminizes many more by insisting that they act like girls" so that, in the end, "the more scholarly the men the lower their masculinity score tended to be."[31] Here again were all the fears of feminization from nearly a century earlier: that boys raised by women will be less manly than boys raised by men and that the configuration of the modern family turns boys into mushy little wimps.

Other writers followed suit. Hans Sebald's frantic and frightened tract *Momism: The Silent Disease of America* (1976) chronicled a generation of emotionally frustrated women whose career ambitions had been thwarted and who therefore sank despondently into professional motherhood, demanding of their children the career successes that they, the mothers, had never been able to achieve—and making "psychological wrecks" of their sons in the process. Echoing Philip Wylie's vituperative 1942 fusillade *Generation of Vipers*, Sebald exposed the "crippling peril" of Momism, the "hidden savagery" of "Mom's repressive transaction." His motto? "When Learning Masculinity, Don't Imitate the Teacher."[32]

Robert Ardrey, one of a host of popularizers of the new field of sociobiology, argued that the American mother is "the unhappiest female that the primate world has ever seen,

and the most treasured objective in her heart of hearts is the psychological castration of husbands and sons."[33] A writer in *True* magazine called on his brethren to resist the civilizing pulls of feminization, which meant resisting the city as a source of domestication, hence enervation, since cities and their "suburban occlusions" are run by women and since "Gloria Whosits and whoever started the current thrombosis are city women."[34] Anthropologist Lionel Tiger was so concerned about gender blending that he advocated, in *Men in Groups* (1969), that urban planners place men's clubs in their plans for urban redevelopment to facilitate male bonding and provide men with a surcease from female invasion of the formerly homosocial workplace.[35]

In one of the decade's more humorous turns at cultural feminization and the relationship between gender identity and class, Tom Wolfe observed the ways in which the desire to appear masculine animated the activities of a bunch of preppy mama's boys. In the essay "Honks and Wonks" (1976), Wolfe drew a distinction between the street masculinity of the working class and that of preppy "honks" who "get hung up on the masculinity thing" because their manhood is always in question:

> It seems to me that when it comes to prep-school honks like Averell Harriman or Thomas Hoving—well, it doesn't matter how many worlds they have conquered or how old they are. As soon as they open their mouths, a bell goes off in the brains of most local-bred New York males: *sissy*. Here are a coupla kids who woulda got *mashed* in the street life.[36]

Preppies were feminized, Wolfe argues, by a class culture that shielded them from the harsher realities of masculine life. When they talked tough, they revealed their phony claims to masculine credentials.

Jewish men were also seen as feminized because they came from a religious culture that stressed morality and literacy; thus, they were seen as bookish and effete. I recall, for example, marching in a protest demonstration against the war in Vietnam as an adolescent, when a heckler screamed at me to "go back to Russia, you Commie Jew faggot!" Though I was startled at the time by the venom of his accusations, stung by his rage, what is most significant to me now is the way that communism, Judaism, and homosexuality were so easily linked in his mind. All three, I came to understand, were not "real men."

Jewish men inherited a legacy of gendered dismissal as gentle, intellectual, and moral. And generations of writers had moaned with pain at being left outside the hallowed gates of masculinity. The decade's most anguished cry came from Alex Portnoy, the angst-ridden antihero of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1967), who screams to his psychiatrist, "Doctor, I can't stand anymore being frightened like this over nothing! Bless me with manhood! Make me brave! Make me strong! Make me *whole!*"[37] With the stereotypes of Jewish mothers as castrating and all-consuming, Jewish men were among the archetypal feminized men.

Many Jews fought back, both rhetorically and politically. A generation of writers followed Norman Mailer into Jewish tough-guy poses. Some Jewish men began to articulate a vision of Jewish virility, a kind of "Muscular Judaism." In part, celebrating Zionist militarism in Israel was a vehicle by which American Jewry could come to terms with the Holocaust. If the Holocaust had feminized European Jewish men, who were castigated as incapable of protecting their families and were therefore led sheepishly to the slaughter, then supporting Israeli territorial expansion was a way to rescue one's manhood. And the

discovery of Jewish resistance to Nazism gave Jewish men "Jewish Buffalo Bills" or "Jewish Tarzans," according to Arthur Koestler. Leon Uris's *Exodus* (1958) offered a new version of heroic Judaism. "We Jews are not what we have been portrayed to be," Uris told an interviewer immediately after the novel appeared. "In truth we have been fighters," as he wrote in a new preface to the paperback edition:

> [A]ll the cliché Jewish characters who have cluttered up our American fiction—the clever businessman, the brilliant doctor, the sneaky lawyer, the sulking artist—all the good folk who spend their chapters hating themselves, the world, and all their aunts and uncles . . . all those steeped in self-pity . . . all those golden riders of the psychoanalysis couch . . . all these have been left where they rightfully belong, on the cutting room floor.[38]

As I learned on that New York City street in 1965, the fears of feminization only partially cloaked a simmering homophobic fear, a fear that homosexuality was "spreading like a murky smog over the American scene," as Betty Friedan had put it in *The Feminine Mystique*. Hans Sebald claimed that the mother had "cast a spell" on young boys, "preventing them from developing normal heterosexual interest," so that the mother "bore the main responsibility" for sexual "deviance." Some parents worried that opening home economics courses to boys would "rob" boys of their masculinity and lead to "sexual deviance."[39]

Peter and Barbara Wyden's *Growing Up Straight: What Every Thoughtful Parent Should Know About Homosexuality* (1968) provided anxious parents with a set of early warning signs of homosexuality in their sons. "Pre-homosexual" boys were identified by their "unmasculine" behaviors, which were reinforced by overdominant mothers and absent fathers. For these vulnerable boys to become well-adjusted heterosexual men, fathers must become role models for their sons, and mothers must accept their husbands' place at the head of the family. Pre-homosexual boys grew up with inverted gender identities because they were taught the wrong things by parents who enacted reversals themselves. Only "sexually normal homes" could be certain to produce normal, heterosexual men.[40]

The gay liberation movement posited a strong riposte to the facile equation of homosexuality and masculine gender identity and made the counterclaim that gay men were as much "real" men as straight men.[41] Following the Stonewall riots of 1969, in which gay men fought back against a police raid on a Greenwich Village bar, and the subsequent birth of the gay liberation movement, a new gay masculinity emerged in gay enclaves of America's major cities. In these "gay ghettos," the "clone," as he was called, dressed in hypermasculine garb (flannel shirts, blue jeans, leather) and had short hair (not at all androgynous) and a mustache; he was athletic, highly muscular. In short, the clone looked more like a "real man" than most straight men.[42]

And the clones—who constituted roughly one-third of all gay men living in the major urban enclaves of the 1970s—enacted a hypermasculine sexuality in steamy back rooms, bars, and bathhouses where sex was plentiful, anonymous, and very hot. No unnecessary foreplay, romance, or postcoital awkwardness. Sex without attachment. One might even say that, given the norms of masculinity (that men are always seeking sex, ready for sex, wanting sex), gay men were just about the only men in America who were getting as much sex as they wanted. And gay men were certainly making it plain that the traditional

equation of gay man as failed man was no longer tenable. Gay liberation signaled that gay men, too, could stake their claim for manhood.[43]

Together feminism, black liberation, and gay liberation provided a frontal assault on the traditional way that men had defined their manhood—against an other who was excluded from full humanity by being excluded from those places where men were real men. It was as if the screen against which American men had for generations projected their manhood had suddenly grown dark, and men were left to sort out the meaning of masculinity all by themselves.

Enter "men's liberation," a curious mixture of a social movement and psychological self-help manual that emerged in the mid-1970s. Media pundits often excoriated men's liberation as a bunch of middle-class white guys feeling left out of the fun of being oppressed and trying to jump on the liberation bandwagon. But men's liberation was more than merely a case of oppression envy. Its impulse, at least originally, came from the effort to take to heart the critiques of Self-Made Masculinity first voiced by the women's movement and later by the gay liberation movement. If men were supposed to be so powerful and oppressive, how come so many men were still living lives of quiet desperation—working in boring and unfulfilling jobs, trapped in unhappy marriages with little or no relationship with their children, with few, if any, close friends, isolated, lonely, and unaware of their feelings? "Male liberation calls for men to free themselves of the sex-role stereotypes that limit their ability to be human," announced Jack Sawyer in "On Male Liberation" (1970), a founding text of the new men's lib literature. Following his call, dozens of other works poured into the growing field, including Warren Farrell's *The Liberated Man* (1974), Marc Feigen Fasteau's *The Male Machine* (1975), Herb Goldberg's *The Hazards of Being Male* (1975) and *The New Male* (1979), Jack Nichols's *Men's Liberation* (1975), and two anthologies, Deborah David and Robert Brannon's *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority* (1976) and Joseph Pleck and Jack Sawyer's *Men and Masculinity* (1974).[44]

As women had sought liberation from restrictive stereotyped sex roles, so, too, did men begin to understand traditional masculinity as a burden, a form of oppression. "It's becoming clear to many of us that many of our most important inner needs cannot be met by acting in the ways we have been expected to act as men," noted the psychologist Pleck in an interview in 1973. The Berkeley Men's Center Manifesto counted the ways: "We no longer want to strain and compete to live up to an impossible oppressive masculine image—strong, silent, cool, handsome, unemotional, successful, master of women, leader of men, wealthy, brilliant, athletic, and 'heavy.' "[45]

At its core, men's liberation provided a coherent critique of the Self-Made Man; in its eyes *he* was the failure. As a collection of dos and don'ts, the male sex role was a recipe for despair; given what it took to be a real man, few, if any, men could live up to the image, and hence all men would feel like failures as men. What's worse, the psychological costs of trying to live up to the image would lead men into lives of isolation and despair, of repressed emotion and deferred dreams. The blueprint for masculinity

is a blueprint for self-destruction. . . . The masculine imperative, the pressure and compulsion to perform, to prove himself, to dominate, to live up to the "masculine ideal"—in short, to "be a man"—supersedes the instinct to survive. . . . Close examination of a man's behavior reveals a powerfully masochistic, self-hating, and often pathetically self-destructive style.

Our society is therefore full of "success-driven men at the end points of their success voyage, living in a nightmarish world of not knowing whom to trust, unable to find satisfaction in intimate contact, unaware of what they want and feel, and rigidly resistant to opening up in order to find out."[46]

Men's liberationists offered a systematic assault on what they called the male sex role, echoing many of the earlier critics of the workplace and family life that had attended the rise of Self-Made Manhood. For the first time in American history, outside of those small groups of Greenwich Village bohemians earlier in the century, men themselves were refusing to live up to the prescribed package of behaviors and traits that defined American manhood. They did not run off to the West, seeking to reclaim their manhood in the wilds of nature, nor did they escape into masculinist fantasies of adventure and heroic struggle. And they didn't seek to reclaim their manhood by the further exclusion of women, men of color, and gay men. (Some men's liberationists actually saw those movements as inspirational.) The very notion of Self-Made Masculinity was under siege—and from the very men who were supposed to live up to its ideals.

In the introduction to *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority*, the psychologist Robert Brannon brilliantly reduced the male sex role into four basic rules of manhood. The first and perhaps most important rule is "No Sissy Stuff": One can never do anything that even remotely hints of the feminine. The second rule, "Be a Big Wheel," indicates that masculinity is measured by power, wealth, success. The third rule reminds men to "Be a Sturdy Oak," since real men show no emotions, are emotionally reliable by being emotionally inexpressive. And finally, "Give 'em Hell" meant to exude an aura of manly daring and aggression. Always take risks, go for it. These four rules sum up the masculine predicament, and men "have been limited and diverted from whatever our real potential might have been by the prefabricated mold of the male sex role."[47]

How were men to free themselves from the prison of the male sex role? For one thing, men's liberationists wanted out of the corporate rat race, a "bland and boring" arena with little opportunity for self-expression or self-fulfillment. Being a big wheel was unsatisfying and deadening to real human experience. Work was "fraught with dehumanizing—i.e. unmanning—influences," wrote British critic Myron Brenton. As one thirty-six-year-old civil engineer told him, "I just don't get it. I've got everything. I really have. All the same, now and then, I get the feeling I'm in a prison or something. Happens when everything's on top of me, closing in, you know?" The rugged individualism of the Heroic Artisan was gone, as men sat "in lushly carpeted offices where the faint crackling of typewriters can barely be heard above Muzak," added Jack Nichols. As one corporate manager put it, "Every so often I feel like making it all disappear—start fresh. Hey, man, wouldn't you like to have been a pioneer?" one corporate manager confessed, while another added that he wanted to "chuck it all and take a raft down the Amazon!" In the absence of any sense of adventure, accomplishment, or fulfillment, men turn to accumulation of wealth. But as psychiatrist Robert Gould warned in a 1973 essay in *Ms.*, "Measuring Masculinity by the Size of a Paycheck," money was a "pretty insecure peg on which to hang a masculine image."[48]

Blue-collar workers suffered an even more dismally emasculating fate. One study found these men playing out "dramas of manliness in work settings" in everything they did—except their work. They wrote off white-collar workers as "desk jockeys" and "pencil pushers," who had sold out their manhood for the "dubious merits of a white shirt and a higher social status," while their reveling in off-color jokes, pornography,

obscenities, and "adopting a stance of indifference as a form of self-protection" became demonstrations of working-class manliness. Men's liberationists rejected competition, aggression, and alienation and claimed that by changing men's roles, men's work would be an expression of their selves, not the repudiation of their humanity.[49]

At home, men's liberationists argued that men were equally disconnected and despairing. Being a sturdy oak meant denying or suppressing emotion and spontaneity. A "man isn't someone you'd want to have around in a crisis—like raising children or growing old together," wrote actor Alan Alda as he signed up for men's liberation. And male sexuality operated on the performance principle, not the pleasure principle; men turned sex into work, experiencing "performance anxiety" while they worked to "get the job done." Sex was a "dangerous encounter," the ultimate test of masculinity; our sex-role conditioning had destroyed "the potential for joyful, authentic, spontaneous, sexual responsiveness," according to Marc Feigen Fasteau. The male sex role reduces fatherhood to a "financial functionary" to children, forcing men to be not only absentee landlords in their homes but also absentee fathers with their children.[50]

If the traditional role models were unsatisfying, men needed to find new models for manhood. Theologians Thomas Hearn and Leonard Swidler returned to Jesus as masculine archetype but, this time, with exactly the opposite intentions of the Muscular Christians nearly a century earlier. To Swidler, Jesus was a "feminist," while to Hearn he was a "sissy" who

> was given to feeling and expressing a wide range of the "tender" emotions; he wept without shame; he freely touched other men and even—I tremble to say it—*kissed* them. He was intuitive; he strongly sensed dependency on the human community as well as on the Father. He responded to beauty; he was touched with compassionate tenderness at the sight of suffering. He loved little children, and with kindred affection he regarded the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.[51]

Others proposed a desexualized androgyny by which women could get in touch with their "masculine sides" and men their "feminine sides" and thus both become whole people. A few suggested that gay men had already achieved such contact with their feminine sides, which explained what they took to be gay men's relative ease with intimacy, sensitivity, and emotion. Perhaps homosexual manhood could be a model for heterosexual men, who were, they suggested, still stifled by homophobic fears of expressing emotion or the need for physical contact with other men.

What virtually all men's liberationists promised was that by rejecting traditional masculinity, men would live longer, happier, and healthier lives, lives characterized by close and caring relationships with children, with women, and with other men. Where they differed was over feminism. Some men's libbers, like Herb Goldberg, saw feminism as "unbalanced, unfair and psychologically invalid." Dismissing feminist leader Gloria Steinem, for example, Goldberg wrote that she concocted "a mixture of facts, half-truths, hyperbole, sweeping generalizations, and the fiery adjectives of an old-time preacher or charismatic crowd manipulator" in order to "castigate, in wholesale fashion, the *entire* male sex." Another feminist, he wrote, who "reacts with rage and fury at men for their alleged abuses" only "reveals her lack of perspective and empathy" for the ways in which—and this is a key insight for many men's libbers—"*men* have been trapped."[52]

Others saw feminism as providing half the answer: Just as women had to liberate themselves from their sex role, so too did men have to liberate themselves from their oppressive sex role. Warren Farrell, a self-proclaimed "liberated man" and convener of the National Organization for Women's Task Force on the Masculine Mystique, was masterful in providing role reversals that revealed to men what had been women's experience as sex objects. At the consciousness-raising groups he initiated, he organized male beauty contests to give men a sense of how traditional masculinity was experienced by those against whom it was deployed. Farrell believed that men could actually benefit from women's liberation; individually a man could be freed of the work pressure to be a woman's "security object" and thus be free to pursue his personal life with less stress and anxiety.[53]

But for some the personal was not merely psychological, and it did not involve the false equivalences between women's and men's experiences. The personal was political, and by confronting and challenging traditional masculinity, they believed they were simultaneously striking a blow for the liberation of women, black people, and gays and lesbians. Marc Feigen Fasteau believed that feminism implied both "women's and men's liberation," and Glenn Bucher's *Straight/White/Male* (1976) used gay liberation and black liberation as the starting points for a critique of traditional masculinity. According to Bucher and his colleagues, straight white men are dehumanized, but they are not oppressed; they are, rather, oppressors, and they must "restructure their identities and reroot themselves in a way of life that is not dependent upon the benefits of the status quo."[54]

Psychologist Joseph Pleck's work provided perhaps the most significant and sustained scholarly effort to expose the male sex role as a fraud. In his more polemical essays, "My Male Sex Role—and Ours" (1974) and "Men's Power with Women, Other Men, and Society" (1977), Pleck placed the psychological experience of men within a larger context of social and political oppression. In a style far more honestly self-revelatory than many of the other writers and with nary a hint of self-congratulation, Pleck argued that patriarchy has been a dual system of oppression, a system by which men have oppressed women and in which some men have oppressed other men, so that "to be a man with other men means to always fear being attacked, victimized, exploited, and in an ultimate sense, murdered by other men."[55]

Pleck's 1981 scholarly treatise *The Myth of Masculinity* provided the culmination of men's liberation theory as academic social psychology, challenging the basic explanation of gender development that academic psychology had been advancing since the mid-1930s. Rather than begin with the anxieties, stress, and pressures that men feel and from which therefore they need liberation, Pleck begins with a dissection of the male sex role itself. What he calls the Male Sex Role Identity (MSRI) model is itself the problem; the MSRI model creates role demands that are so internally contradictory that no one could possibly live up to them. Trying to fulfill the role demands is the real source of stress in men's lives. For example, remaining cool under pressure on the one hand and giving 'em hell on the other hand pull men in opposing directions. Pleck argued that the MSRI was a testable hypothesis, not an established scientific fact; for that matter, he argued, the correlation between the prescribed behaviors and the feelings of secure manhood was actually very weak empirically. Even those men who conformed to the stereotypic definition didn't seem any more confident in themselves as real men. "How people

continue to believe so fervently in values and norms according to which they can only be failures is an awe-inspiring phenomenon," he wrote.[56]

Instead of the MSRI, Pleck posited a model of Male Sex-Role Strain, which placed tension, contradiction, and anxiety squarely in the center of men's efforts to demonstrate manhood. Psychology was thus not going to be the liberator of men but was instead cast as the conduit for those very contradictory and confusing messages that kept us all in constant turmoil. It wasn't men as much as it was the prescription for masculinity that caused the crisis of masculinity and contributed to the oppression of women and minorities.

Men's liberation drew some modest curiosity from cultural observers, some tentative and wary alliances with some feminist women, and a large amount of indifference from the majority of American men. But there were telling signs in popular culture that the times were changing. Traditional genres continued, but they were more popular when they offered twists on their own standard formulae. With hindsight we now see how these traditional genres were beginning to break down.

Take, for example, the grizzled tough-guy detective of classic film noir. *Marlowe* (1969), a resetting of Raymond Chandler's detective novel *The Little Sister* into hippie, drug-infested Los Angeles, uses the ironic sneer of James Garner to express the inability of the old genre to sustain men's hopes. Marlowe, a smoking, hard-drinking private detective, is enlisted to help a naive, innocent Kansas girl who is searching for her lost brother. During the course of the film, he suckers an Asian kung fu fighter (played by Bruce Lee), who had earlier trashed his office, into jumping to his death by calling him "just a little bit gay," thus simultaneously linking Asian immigrants and homosexuality and disposing of them both as threats to his manhood. Of course, it turns out that the naive little sister is also hopelessly corrupt, demonstrating once again that any faith in women—or even men's role as their protector—is faith misplaced and earnest effort manipulated.

The classic buddy film also tended to end in tragedy in the late 1960s and 1970s; what's more, the settings for these films became increasingly ironic in films like *Easy Rider* or *Midnight Cowboy*, both released in 1969. The male bonding celebrated in these films is a defensive reaction to traditional masculine failure; the men turn to each other because the world (and women) have failed them. In *Easy Rider* frontier escapism becomes a tamed delinquency, complete with an unsettling hallucinogenic drug experience; but the macho defiance is ultimately tragic, even as its misogynist core goes unchallenged. In *Midnight Cowboy* a de-eroticized homosexuality—an emotional, but not sexual connection—occurs in a highly ironic context: the failure of Joe Buck to establish himself as a stud. Instead, Joe finds love and success as a male mother, nursing the tubercular Ratso to his peaceful death.

Carnal Knowledge (1972) and *Deliverance* (1973) also recapitulated the buddy film, again with the bitter theme that masculine failure solidifies friendship. The bonding between Sandy (Art Garfunkel) and Jonathan (Jack Nicholson) is animated in "the mutuality of sharing and recounting sexual experiences," writes film critic Joan Mellers. In their characters the viewers got a sense of masculinity in transition. On the one hand, Sandy represents an effort, ultimately unsuccessful, to articulate a different, emotionally-based way of relating to women. By contrast, Nicholson's portrayal of Jonathan unflinchingly exposes the negative aspects of conventional success-oriented masculinity: He is unable to move beyond the "objectification-fixation-conquest" described by men's liberationists. This model proves so devastating that it becomes sexually deflating; Jonathan is impotent.[57]

Deliverance provided one of the era's signal films about both the dangers and redemptive possibilities of male bonding. Both novel and film begin as conventionally masculinist voyages of discovery for Ed as he floats down the river with the darker, more earthily primal Lewis, his spirit guide in the masculine quest:

> Why on earth am I here? I thought. But then I turned back to the car to see what Lewis was doing, I caught a glimpse of myself in the rear window. I was light green, a tall forest man, an explorer, guerilla, hunter. I liked the idea and the image, I must say. Even if this was just a game, a charade, I had let myself in for it, and I was here in the woods, where such people as I had got myself up were supposed to be. Something or other was being made good. I touched the knife hilt at my side, and remembered that all men were once boys, and that boys are always looking for ways to become men. Some of the ways are easy too; all you have to do is be satisfied that it has happened.[58]

And the book underlines that such camaraderie is only possible outside any sexual relationship between men, that such a relationship may undermine friendship. *Deliverance* simultaneously eroticizes and glamorizes the friendship among the men while it de-eroticizes the sexual scenes of homosexual rape. In a sense, the film graphically provided one of the cinema's first clearly articulated feminist understandings that rape is a crime of power and violence and not a crime of sexual desire—although the rape had to happen to a man for men to understand this. What *Deliverance* expresses is a cautionary tale: The male desire for escape from women is fraught with danger—danger from other men who are not so civilized that they can repress their desires and from a nature whose wildness is actually a threat to men's effort to prove themselves. In short, watch out, men: When you escape from the civilizing constraints of women, you will rape and murder each other.[59]

If men were made uneasy by these buddy films, though, and if the rise of the gay liberation movement seemed to put all male friendships under a new homophobic scrutiny, then they could always take refuge in the novels of Norman Mailer, who reassured his readers in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967) to:

> fear not, gentle auditor, they is men, real Texas men, they don't ding ding ring a ling on no queer street with each other, shit, no, they just talk to each other that way to express Texas tenderness than which there is nothing more tender than a flattened pan-fried breaded paper-thin hard-ass Texas steak.[60]

When historian and playwright Martin Duberman, in his 1977 play *Visions of Kerouac*, dared to suggest any erotic possibilities in the male bonding between Dean Moriarty and Neil Cassady in Jack Kerouac's Beat novels, he was vilified by several critics as if he'd tainted one of the most redemptive, purest of masculine archetypes, buddy bonding on the road.

Three other films, all from 1971, offer eerily negative portraits of contemporary manhood. In *Straw Dogs* Dustin Hoffman plays an effete intellectual who with his wife rents a house in the English countryside. She holds him in contempt as unmanly. Later, she is raped by working-class thugs who doubt his ability to fight back. Yet when he finally does fight back, unaware of her rape, we know his manhood is not redeemed. In *Shaft*, a prototypical blaxploitation film of the era, Richard Roundtree plays a private detective

—"a private dick that's a sex machine with all the chicks," as the theme song had it— who is always one step ahead of the rather nerdy white police officers on the case. Little wonder, in those sexually unrepressed 1970s, that black hypersexuality should have been so crassly depicted and equally dehumanized. And in *Play It Again Sam*, Woody Allen presents us with the first in a series of films about the revenge of the nerds, as yet another bespectacled wimp confesses that "most men are secretly tortured by not being Bogart." So Bogart returns as fantasy construction and imparts a series of lessons in manhood for Allen-as-nebbish-Everyman to follow. Men needed to reclaim their manhood; all they needed was the right role model.

By the end of the 1970s, positive role models were increasingly hard to find. The end of the decade revealed the impotence of the stalwart friend in *The Deer Hunter* (1978); the saga of the Self-Made Man was retold as tragedy as in Geoffrey Wolff's *The Duke of Deception* (1979). Wolff's father was literally "the author of his own circumstances," able to "disassemble his history, begin at zero, and re-create himself"—but only because he completely fabricated his autobiography to suit his circumstances. The Self-Made Man turned out to be a con artist. Male bonding was equally bereft of meaning in Leonard Michaels's *The Men's Club* (1978), in which a group of upper middle-class professionals in Berkeley, California, imitate their wives' consciousness-raising group, only to find themselves more lost than before.[61]

On television the domestic patriarch of the 1950s and early 1960s had virtually disappeared, replaced by a working-class blowhard, Archie Bunker, or a bossy ignoramus, Mel, on *Alice*, behind whose back the waitresses rolled their eyes at his foolishness. On sitcoms like *Three's Company, Benson*, and *Night Court*, middle-class masculinity had become the butt of humor, not the object of veneration.

Star Trek revealed, perhaps more clearly, if unintentionally, than any other TV show, the growing crisis of masculinity. Here manhood was divided into two halves—the rational, abstract, and emotionally invulnerable alien, embodied in Mr. Spock, and the aggressive, erotic, and intuitive traditional version of manhood, expressed by Captain Kirk. Here again was that most American of literary themes: cross-race (in this case cross-species) male bonding, although this time the white and nonwhite men were depicted as coequal. Neither was complete, and therefore neither could serve as a role model for the future. Full manhood could not even be reclaimed in space, the "final frontier."

One modestly hopeful sign was the emergence of a new vision of fatherhood, signaled, in part, by Dustin Hoffman's Academy Award–winning portrayal of Ted Kramer in *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979). Masculine redemption for a failed marriage and a blind-alley career is found, as in the 1950s, in fatherhood, but this time with an ironic slap at feminism. We were invited to cheer when his ex-wife (Meryl Streep) finally decides to renounce her efforts to gain custody, since we have just witnessed the emergence of the sensitive new father from the chrysalis of an indifferent careerist. If put to the test, men turn out to actually be better "mothers" than women.

An old theme, perhaps, but it still didn't work. Masculinity could not be reclaimed in an arena so feminized. Nor could it be retrieved in outer space aboard the *Enterprise*. The main theme of men's liberation—that changing men's *roles* would somehow magically transform the enormous economic and social structures that held those roles in place— revealed a theoretical naïveté that would easily sour into the whine of a new voice of victimhood. Men were still searching, but they still hadn't found what they were looking for.