

THE WIMP FACTOR

by Bruce Curtis

Illustrated by Edward Sorel

A year ago we were in the midst of a presidential campaign most memorable for charges by both sides that the opponent was not hard enough, tough enough, masculine enough. That he was, in fact, a sissy. Both sides also admitted this sort of rhetoric was deplorable. But it's been going on since the beginning of the Republic.

Just before George Bush announced his running mate in 1988, a one-liner going the rounds was that he should choose Jeane Kirkpatrick to add some machismo to the ticket. Until midway through the campaign the embarrassing "fact" about Bush, as revealed in a spate of jokes, cartoons, and anecdotes gleefully reported or generated by the press, was the candidate's "wimpiness." A wimp, of course, is effete, ineffectual, somehow unmanly. Real men, the diametrical opposite of wimps, are war heroes and government leaders, especially combat pilots and spy masters. But wait! Didn't George Bush become a combat pilot at eighteen, fly on fifty-eight missions, and win the Distinguished Flying Cross? And doesn't everyone know he directed the Central Intelligence Agency?

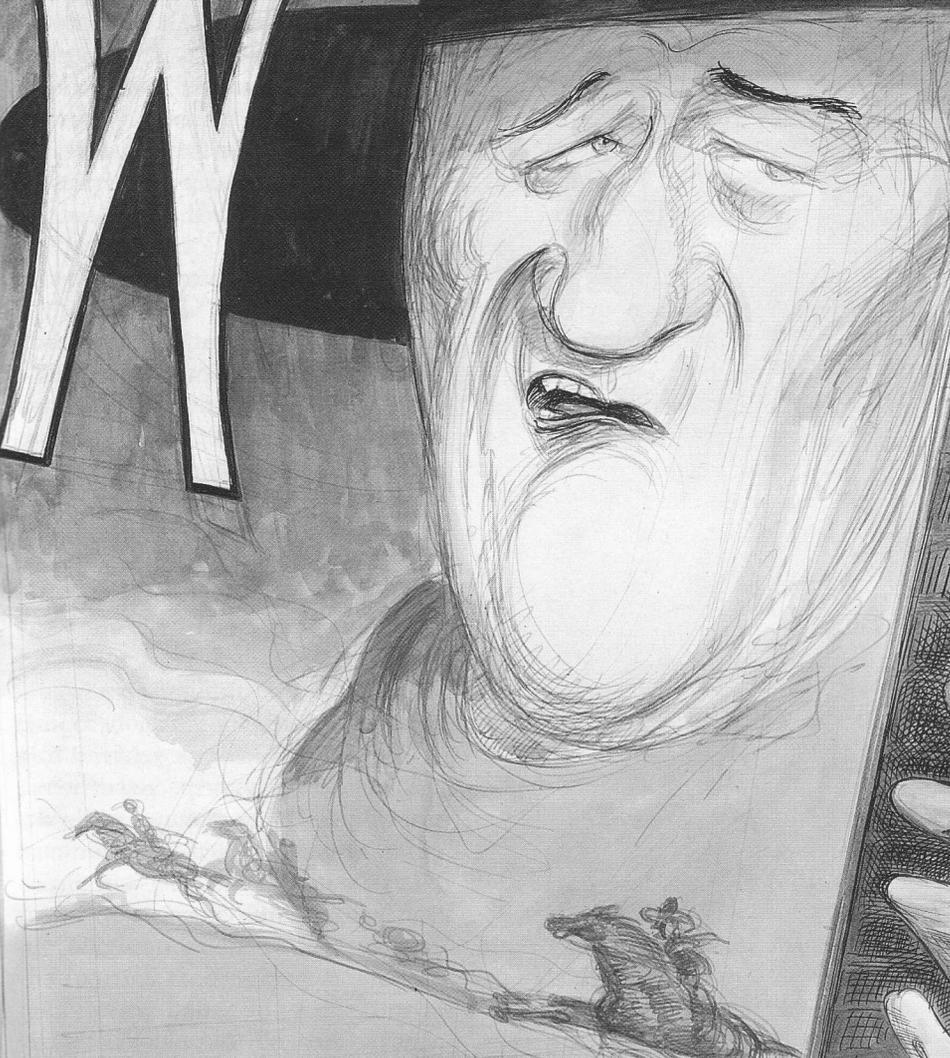
Clearly, the phenomenon of George Bush, Wimp, has been grounded not upon the rock of objective fact but upon treacherous sands of image and modes of masculinity. Clearly, also, as Ronald Reagan recently and often demonstrated, the successful public man will cling to image, leaving fact to shift for itself. To do so is imperative when one's masculine image is at stake. And in American politics, at stake it almost always is. Just as in the presidential campaign of 1988 George Bush fought to assert and reassert his masculinity—to avoid effete gestures and calls for "just another splash" of coffee—so aspiring or established politicians routinely must nurture a masculine image for the public, and especially for the press.

Consider Bush's running mate, the "Veepette" or "Bush Lite," who had to

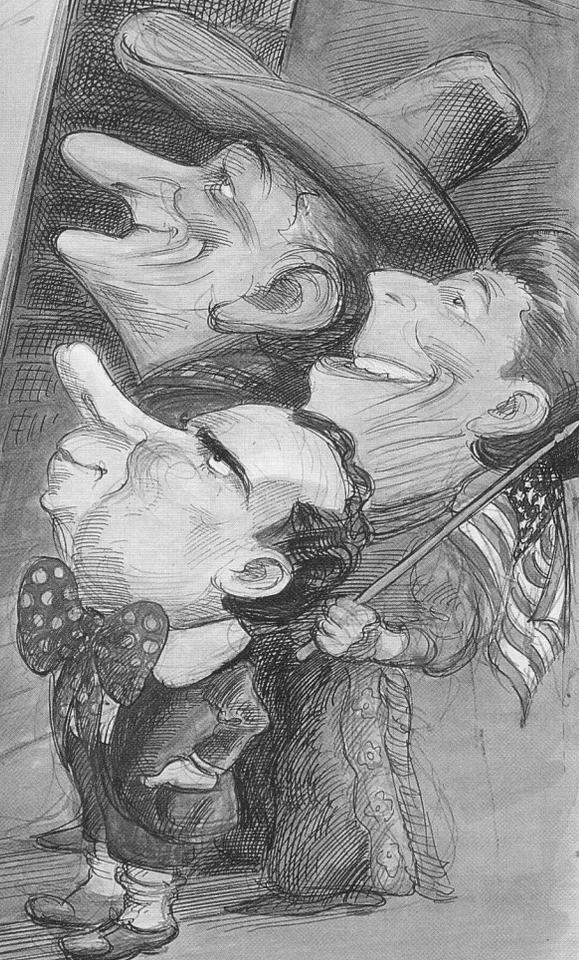
JOHN

Wayne

IN



“DUEL ON THE
CAMPAIGN
TRAIL”



Edward Goreau

face charges that his National Guard service was combat dodging by a “war wimp,” a “sissy rich boy” who was Quayle-ing in the face of danger. Quayle is what you get, reported a foreign observer, when you cross a chicken with a hawk. Even the columnist Richard Cohen, a critic of sexual stereotypes, slipped easily into wimp-baiting, saying that in his debate with Sen. Lloyd Bentsen, Quayle “looked like a mamma’s boy at a family showdown searching for a sympathetic face.” Another liberal, the *Doonesbury* creator Garry Trudeau, suggested in his comic strip that George Bush’s late-mushrooming masculinity derived from anabolic steroids.

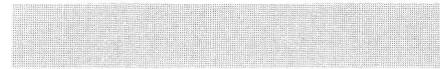
Gov. Michael Dukakis may have seemed manly enough to the casual observer, but Massachusetts pols ten years ago joked that because he dined at home every evening with his family, he was “Kitty-whipped.” In 1988 “the Duke” (a nickname that invited unflattering comparisons with John Wayne) took up tank driving and played catch on his front lawn with a baseball pro. Nevertheless, commenting retrospectively, Joseph A. Califano, Jr., regretted that “from the beginning Dukakis had ‘wimp on defense’ written all over him.”

Numerous analyses of comparative masculinity scanned and probed the bodies of the candidates, avoiding only their minds. What did they eat, and why? asked one article. It went on: “This is more than mere trivia. Social scientists agree that the food choices of political candidates can say much more than any speech. . . .” Macho pork rinds were the choice of Bush, who seemed to be baiting his line with them for good-ol’-boy Southern voters. In contrast, Dukakis, the article continued, seemed more “comfortable with his masculinity and sexuality.” He did not hesitate to eat that “not macho” “women’s food” ice cream, and coffee ice cream at that.

So far as I know, social scientists did not reveal Jesse Jackson’s food fetishes, but one analyst of so-called body language intuited easily that Jackson was “the most macho,” where-

as Dukakis’s handshake was “kind of wimpy,” and Bush was “more characteristic of women” in multiple movements, especially in “sort of leading with the pelvic region,” since “real machos lead with their chests.” However, the analyst was quoted, “I am not saying that he is feminine in his carriage.” A postelection *New Republic* commentator was less reticent, saying, “Visually the president-elect, I regret to say, sags—sort of the male version of the debutante slouch.”

Read his body! Read his menu! When did all this probing of a man’s masculinity, all this political wimp-baiting, begin? Conservatives blame Democrats, liberals blame Republicans. William Safire asserts that



In the last century the prime targets of hypermasculine politicians were the Mugwumps.

Ted Kennedy started it with his “Where was George?” cry at the Atlanta convention. But *Time* notes that while the 1988 Republican convention keynoter, Thomas Kean, accused his party’s opposition of “pastel patriotism,” Jeane Kirkpatrick had in 1984 already labeled them “San Francisco Democrats.” That, recall, was the year of “Mondale Eats Quiche” bumper stickers. In 1988 George Bush continued in the grand tradition by attacking Harvard-tainted Dukakis’s “boutique” foreign policy.

Political wimp-baiting was new neither in 1988 nor in 1984. It has ever been thus. American politicians and the American press perennially reflect and magnify the public’s hopes and fears. The presidential campaign of 1988 only confirmed what a historical perspective reveals: Sweeping changes in American life over decades and cen-

turies have left virtually undampened the burning issue of masculinity; indeed, at times winds of change have fanned the flames. Historically, concern with masculinity has engendered a variant of what in 1969 Kate Millett called “sexual politics”—that is, “power-structured relationships” whereby one group (men) controls another group (women). But American sexual politics has been and is more complex and pervasive than that. Of course, men use sexual politics to control women, but men use sexual politics to control other men as well.

Masculine anxiety attended the birth and growth of American politics. Late in the eighteenth century Thomas Jefferson was accused of “timidity, whimsicalness,” “an inertness of mind,” “a wavering of disposition,” and a weakness for flattery, all stereotypically feminine traits. A late-nineteenth-century historian was more direct: Jefferson had been “womanish” because “he took counsel of his feelings and imagination.” Early in the nineteenth century the Indian fighter, war hero, and duelist Andrew Jackson referred to a politician whom he suspected of homosexuality as “Miss Nancy,” while another politician called the same man “Aunt Fancy.” In the same era, President Van Buren was accused of wearing corsets and taking too many baths, presumably perfumed.

In the game of sexual politics perhaps the most obvious nineteenth-century targets were men—the Alan Aldas of their day—who supported the women’s movement. Such weak-minded creatures, said the *Albany Register* in 1854, “tied to the apron-strings” of “strong-minded” but “unsexed” feminists, were “restless men” who “comb their hair smoothly back, and with fingers locked across their stomachs, speak in a soft voice, and with upturned eyes.” Similarly the *New York Herald* in 1852 had characterized “manish” feminist women as “like hens that crow”—while most men who attended feminist conventions were termed “hen-pecked husbands” who ought to “wear petticoats.”

The petticoat recalls another anti-

quated slur that not long ago flowed easily from the pen of George Will, the columnist. Will seems to have inherited the mantle of concern with national toughness and masculinity from the late columnist Joseph Alsop, who was a grandnephew and spiritual descendant of Theodore Roosevelt. Will, intimating that then presidential candidate Paul Simon's foreign policy would not be tough and manly enough, asserted that Simon had "lifted his pinafore and cried 'Eeek'" when another candidate had "let loose" the "mouse of a thought" that American interests abroad must be defended. With such words, Will managed to insult one man and all women; he may also have intimidated politicians, male or female, who were concerned about the importance of presenting a strong image to the electorate.

In the nineteenth century the prime targets of hypermasculine politicians and journalists were those cultured upper- and middle-class reformers called Mugwumps. The machine spoilsman Roscoe Conkling attacked the leading civil service reformer and editor of *Harper's Weekly* George William Curtis—who was conveniently both a Mugwump and a women's suffragist—by asserting that such effete types "are the man-milliners, the dilettanti and carpet knights of politics" who "forget that parties are not built by deportment, or by ladies' magazines, or by gush. . . ."

These reformers were further denounced as "political hermaphrodites," as "namby-pamby, goody-goody gentlemen" who "sip cold tea." They were, stormed Sen. John Ingalls of Kansas to his fellow legislators, "the third sex" and "have two recognized functions. They sing falsetto, and they are usually selected as the guardians of the seraglios of Oriental despots." They were, fulminated the senator in nicely balanced rhetoric, "effeminate without being either masculine or feminine; unable either to beget or bear; possessing neither fecundity



nor virility; endowed with the contempt of men and the derision of women, and doomed to sterility, isolation, and extinction."

If the political argot of today and a century ago could have been conflated in the 1988 election, surely George Bush, with his Ivy League and Establishment pedigree, would have been labeled a "Mugwump," for, like Bush, the Mugwumps were attacked not only for the substance of their politics but also for their style and social class. And surely questions about the manliness of both derived from pervasive unease about masculinity in both *fin de siècle* eras. The hyperbole of Ingalls and Conkling suggests that an enduring American male concern with masculinity became inordinate late in the nineteenth century. Indeed, numerous scholars

have discovered a masculinity crisis in that era of unsettling change. Why did this crisis develop?

One answer is that by the late nineteenth century not only working-class, black, and immigrant men but women—especially Anglo-Saxon women—were demanding a share of the power, prestige, and wealth of the dominant males. As recognition of their inferior status impelled women to strive for equality, rapid industrialization and urbanization created greater opportunities and necessities for them to break from rigid gender roles. Consequently, a great many men expressed heightened concern to maintain, or restore, or even intensify traditional gender distinctions and especially insisted upon the crucial importance of masculine "virility." This was true not only of privi-

leged males but also of black and immigrant males, who saw their masculinity as one of their few resources.

When Basil Ransom, the traditionalist Southerner in Henry James's 1886 novel *The Bostonians*, speaks to Verena Tarrant about aggressive feminist women, he says: "There has been far too much talk about you, and I want to leave you alone altogether. My interest is in my own sex; yours evidently can look after itself. . . . The whole generation is womanized; the masculine tone is passing out of the world; it's a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age. . . . The masculine character, the ability to dare and endure, to know and yet not fear reality, to look the world in the face and take it for what it is—a very queer and partly very base mixture—that is what I want to preserve, or rather, as I may say, to recover; and I must tell you that I don't in the least care what becomes of you ladies while I make the attempt!"

As in fiction, a California newspaper editorialized in the 1890s that "the ardor and strength of prime manhood is a much needed quality in American government, especially at this time, when all things political and all things social are in the transition stage." Then into the masculinity crisis strode Teddy Roosevelt, a weak-eyed Harvard man, to be sure, but a self-made boxer, rancher, and Rough Rider, come to preach the "Strenuous Life" of benevolent expansionism and to shame members of either sex who threatened traditional gender roles. "In the last analysis," Roosevelt asserted in 1899, "a healthy state can exist only when the men and women . . . lead clean, vigorous, healthy lives. . . . The man must be glad to do a man's work, to dare and endure and to labor; to keep himself, and to keep those dependent upon him. The woman must be the house-wife, the helpmeet . . . the wise and fearless mother of many healthy children. . . . When men fear work or fear righteous war, when women fear motherhood, they tremble on the brink of doom; and well it is that they should vanish from the earth. . . ." Consistent

in such concerns, Roosevelt would later rage that, by not plunging into World War I, President Wilson had "done more to emasculate American manhood . . . than anyone else I can think of. He is a dangerous man . . . for he is a man of brains and he debauches men of brains."

The remarkable fact about Teddy Roosevelt is that despite superior qualities of intelligence and leadership, despite his popularity and power as head of a great and rising imperial nation, when he preaches manhood from his national "bully pulpit," he sounds, to present-day observers, insecure. And if in this he seems a virtual contemporary of politicians we know well, that is perhaps because, a

TR raged that in keeping out of World War I, Wilson had "emasculated American manhood."

century after the first wave of feminism threatened to inundate Roosevelt and his cohorts, American men are now awash in a second wave. Many men, in a traditionally reactive way, are experiencing another crisis in our enduring historical concern to be masculine enough. That concern, as Richard Hofstadter perceived a quarter-century ago in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, is written into "the national code at large."

The roots of our present masculinity crisis grow deep into American history, but they draw special sustenance from developments of the last half-century—depression, war, cold war, and inflation. In this era traditional gender-role verities have been overridden more than ever by events: widespread male unemployment in the thirties; demand for women workers ever since the for-

ties; revolutionary changes in international relations, in which American power has increased and then diminished; and a revived, broadened women's movement. Especially in the last twenty-five years, masses of women, impelled by personal and family opportunities and necessities, have asserted their rights to work, to freedom, and to sexuality. Even traditional women have been drawn from the domestic into the public sphere.

The reaction of men to this battery of changes in social conditions has been complex, involving confusion, resentment, resistance, and grudging acquiescence to realities, public and domestic, American and international. Sometimes men have felt gratitude for being relieved of manhood's solitary burdens; occasionally they have supported more egalitarian gender roles and relationships. Many American men, however, have not yet adjusted to the withering of their self-image as the husband-father-breadwinner who endures daily battles in the public jungle for the sake of his loved ones.

What does all of this mean for politics? First that, as feminists have taught us, the personal is political. But also that the political is personal. Politicians, unsurprisingly, play to their constituents' gender-image needs and to their own. Now that the ideal masculine man is farther removed from reality than ever, many nostalgic men, and not a few nostalgic women, demand that our public leaders appear more masculine than ever, a demand to which our leaders may personally be drawn. In 1984 a woman from Warren, Michigan, said that she admired President Ronald Reagan because he was like John Wayne. That statement must cause one to ponder the irony of a society in which an actor-turned-politician can be seen as admirable because he is modeled on another actor. And not just any actor, but on John Wayne, surely the all-time leading sexual politician among actors. Ironically, also, in his acting days Ronald Reagan yearned to emulate John Wayne's success as a tall-walking hero. When asked if he had been nervous after

debating President Carter in 1980, Reagan replied, "Not at all. I've been on the same stage with John Wayne." The politics of image and masculinity can hardly be more precisely illustrated.

We can also test the proposition concerning masculinity that the personal is political and the political personal by examining other presidential aspirants and officeholders of the last quarter-century. John Kennedy came to prominence in an era when American manhood, like his own, had recently been validated in battle. Kennedy's was an era in which the Cold War demanded leaders who were "hard," an era in which McCarthyites sought to dispose of "fellow travelers" (often smeared as effeminate or homosexual) who were "soft on" Communism. Inevitably, it was the era of the "egghead," a male whom the novelist Louis Bromfield defined as "over-emotional and feminine in reactions to any problem"—meaning, of course, Adlai Stevenson. Stevenson, to whom the *New York Daily News* referred as "Adelaide," was supported by "Harvard lace-cuff liberals" and "lace-panty diplomats"; he used "teacup words," which his "fruity" voice "trilled," a poor contrast with Richard Nixon's "manly explanation of his financial affairs."

Given such a climate, one can hardly be surprised that Kennedy, whose father had instilled an almost manic competitive masculinity in his sons, should have sought to assert and reassert his manhood when faced with older men at home and abroad. The story was reported long ago in David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest* (1969), and reaffirmed in Stanley Karnow's 1983 history of Vietnam, that Kennedy, after meeting Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna, told *The New York Times's* James Reston: "I think he thought that anyone who was so young and inexperienced as to get into that mess [the Bay of Pigs] could be taken, and anyone who got into it, and didn't see it through, had no guts. So he just beat hell out

of me. So I've got a terrible problem." Now, Kennedy told Reston, shifting from singular to plural point of view, "we have a problem in making our power credible, and Vietnam is the place."

If the personal was political and the political personal for Kennedy, it was even more nakedly so for his successor. Surely no President has been more earthily vulgar than Lyndon Johnson, particularly when comparing unfavorably the masculinity of underlings and opponents with his own. Reporters have told of repeated instances in which Johnson asserted dominance over an aide, or Hubert Humphrey, or even Ho Chi Minh by saying that he had emasculated the man. Politics, for Lyndon Johnson, could hardly have been more personal, or more sexual. Such a leader might have appeared comic, except that for a great many



Nixon reported his encounter with Khrushchev in heroic images any moviegoer could recognize.

Americans and Vietnamese the political was also intimately personal. Bill Moyers has said of Johnson and Vietnam, "It was almost like a frontier test, as if he were saying, 'By God, I'm not going to let those puny brown people push me around.'" Like Kennedy, Johnson personalized the Vietnam War. He saw it as a game or a wrestling match in which he would make Ho Chi Minh cry "uncle."

One might discuss Richard Nixon in much the same terms, given his concern with personal crises and with crushing his enemies in the game of politics. Nixon's masculine metaphors were, of course, from poker or football or boxing. In *Six Crises*, his encounter as Vice-President with Khrushchev in Moscow is reported in heroic underdog images that any American viewer of ring movies could recognize: "I had

had to counter him like a fighter with one hand tied behind his back. . . . Khrushchev had started the encounter by knocking me out of the ring. At the end, I had climbed back in to fight again. And the second round was still coming up. . . . Now we were going at it toe-to-toe." At the end, "I felt like a fighter wearing sixteen-ounce gloves and bound by Marquis of Queensbury rules, up against a bare-knuckle slugger who had gouged, kneed and kicked." "It was"—Nixon shifted images—"cold steel between us all afternoon." In this contest, Nixon wrote, he had had the facts when he had called Khrushchev, for it would not do to bluff too often in the poker game of world politics.

Even Jimmy Carter, among recent Presidents seemingly the least driven by machismo, revealed during the 1988 campaign his susceptibility to its public demands by remarking that Bush seemed rather "effeminate." Clearly, a major common denominator of recent Presidents, and, indeed, as the sociologist Michael Kimmel believes, of most presidential administrations historically, has been an attraction to "compulsive masculinity, a socially constructed gender identity that is manifest both in individual behavior and in foreign and domestic politics."

Compulsive masculinity is most immediately dangerous in foreign politics. Theoretically, warfare is a form of controlled violence in the pursuit of foreign policy. The danger, as in the Vietnam era, is that the symbiotic bond between male leaders and followers will deteriorate into an irrational competition to prove one's manhood or at least to avoid appearing effeminate. Considerable testimony drawn from the memoirs of former Marines—foot soldiers and officers alike—reveals young men determined to be honorable and brave, to prove themselves, to avoid the shame of failing in training or fleeing in battle. They often chose John Wayne as a role model. Their worst fear, also that of their Commander in Chief, Lyndon Johnson, was that they might cut and run like "nervous Nellies."

The Commander in Chief of Vietnam-era soldiers, says David Halberstam, believed "all those John Wayne movies, a cliché in which real life had styled itself on image," and so Lyndon Johnson demanded a portrait of himself as "a tall tough Texan in the saddle." Such is the meaning of sexual politics for men. Does a Michigan woman confuse Reagan with John Wayne? Some of us can no longer distinguish between *PT 109* (the movie) and reality. Our leaders and soldiers and image makers are indistinguishable. They are daring each other. And they are macho. They are all John Wayne.

As an actor John Wayne personified in dangerously attractive images the romantic myth that masculine style and substance are indivisible; that to express openly and unashamedly one's emotions of doubt, fear, love, and even (unless goaded unendurably) anger is womanish; that the dominant male must control himself, his environment, and indeed all of life, through action, often violent action in chivalric defense of women, children, and country, action forced upon the good man by evil others; that by will power, strength, skill, superior technology, and firepower he can prevail over circumstance and chance, over enemies, personal and national, in a world of black-and-white moral choices.

The point is not that the "manly" characteristics of the myth—courage, assertiveness in the face of aggression, righteous defense of the weak—are undesirable or dangerous in themselves. The cinematic myth is dangerous because it is labeled "for men only" and because it may be distorted and debased by actors on the public scene.

The consequences of this sort of obsessive masculinity can perhaps best be understood in a historical context. Speaking in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, in 1899, Teddy Roosevelt asserted: "I have scant patience with those who fear to undertake the task of governing the Philippines . . .



who make a pretense of humanitarianism to hide and cover their timidity, and who cant about 'liberty' and the 'consent of the governed,' in order to excuse themselves for their unwillingness to play the part of men. Their doctrines, if carried out, would make it incumbent upon us to . . . decline to interfere in a single Indian reservation. Their doctrines condemn your forefathers and mine for ever having settled in these United States." Almost a century later Philip Caputo's 1987 novel *Indian Country* would remind us that the practice among American soldiers of referring to hostile territory in Vietnam as Indian country had historical roots.

If the demands of masculinity have burdened men in American politics, they have pressed with special intensity upon trespassing women, who have automatically been tested by mas-

culine standards. If many men are too wimpy for politics, what are men to think about women, and what are women to think of themselves? Pat Schroeder, for example, shed public tears when she withdrew from the presidential race of 1988. By failing to mask her feelings, Schroeder was widely perceived as having joined the ranks of those—like Ed Muskie—who seemed not manly enough for the rough game of high-stakes politics. After all, would you want a leader with a finger on the nuclear button who was suffering from what the nineteenth century called hysteria or from twentieth-century equivalents, such as PMS? That was substantially the question asked of Geraldine Ferraro in her 1984 debate with George Bush. To all appearances, with steely eye and firm response, Ferraro passed the macho test—so much so, in fact,

that the next morning Bush felt compelled to affirm that in the debate he had “kicked a little ass.”

Women in politics like Ferraro and Schroeder are condemned no matter what they do. If gentle, they are womanish; if tough, they are not womanly. By tradition a female cannot be a courageous, charismatic, wise, effective leader as a woman. Thus one-liners about “macho” Jeane Kirkpatrick, about Indira Gandhi’s being the only man in India’s government. Thus “Iron Lady” Margaret Thatcher plays the manly role but, to allay fears, must make the point that at home she may relax by ironing her husband’s shirts.

So long as the power to define gender characteristics remains a dominant-male prerogative, politics will remain defined as a masculine prerogative, even if women enter politics in considerably increased numbers. For gender definitions are about power relationships, and the power to define is real. Attacks upon Schroeder or Bush as wimps, an earlier attack on Sen. Henry Jackson as homosexual, and Sen. Orrin Hatch’s 1988 smear of the Democrats as “the party of homosexuals” all serve the purpose of excluding or dominating the opposition. Likewise, attacks upon “long-haired men and short-haired women” reformers, a staple of politics since the nineteenth century, seek to limit the range and depth of challenges to established social policy. For according to the masculine logic of sexual politics, all women and all men are relatively “womanized,” except the hardest, toughest, most powerful, most masculine.

Postelection commentary on George Bush has seemed to reflect among journalists a masculinity-concerns-as-usual attitude. Murray Kempton wrote in *The New York Review of Books* that “the Quayle selection more than suggested that Bush fears associates too bold for his own peace and comfort; and he proceeded thereafter to submit himself abjectly to the advisers who at once contrived to make him seem tougher but altogether less likeable than previous experience had permitted us to imagine him.” Some commen-

tators nevertheless concluded that in fact or in image Bush was no longer a wimp, Tom Wicker noting that the “suspect candidate” had “established by September a satisfactory identification as Ronald Reagan’s surrogate, who was not a wimp after all.” Humphrey Taylor concurred, reporting in the *National Review* that at the New Orleans convention Bush had “emerged from the shadow of Ronald Reagan as his own man, a fighter not a wimp.” In a public letter to “Dear George,” Lee Iacocca wrote: “First of all, congratulations! It was a tough campaign, a real street fight toward the end. Nobody will ever call you a wimp again, George. Nice going.” *Newsweek* commented: “The new George Bush looks rugged, even macho, standing chest-deep in the Florida surf. . . . Something startling has happened to the man who was once



Gender definitions are about power relationships, and the power to define is real.

mocked as Ronald Reagan’s lap dog. . . . It could be argued, George Bush walked into the polling booth as Clark Kent and emerged as the Beltway equivalent of Superman.”

Meanwhile, David Beckwith noted left-handedly in *Time* that the candidate had won “with a toughness that surprised even his friends.” Beckwith believed that Bush, having seen aides take credit for Reagan’s successes, “is determined not to be similarly emasculated. . . .” To the contrary, Fred Barnes predicted flatly in *The New Republic* that, lacking a mandate, a program, and congressional cooperation, “Bush will be a eunuch on his honeymoon.”

Genital imagery and masculine anxiety appeared among journalists all along the main-line political spectrum. In *The New Republic* “TRB” summed up the Reagan Presidency as having injected the nation with anabolic steroids, leaving it for the moment “economically and militarily virile. Unfortunately,” “TRB” concluded, “steroids, like sedatives, have side effects, and already our national testicles are starting to shrink . . . beginning to emasculate the Pentagon. . . .” With mixed images, the *National Review*’s William F. Buckley, seeking to buck up the President-elect, noted that “to cave in” on the tax issue would “emasculate the Presidency. That would give the Democratic Congress a free hand to scrape every last shred of pork out of the barrel, and roll even bigger logs over the taxpayers.”

As throughout the history of the Republic, so in the 1988 presidential election’s aftermath, concern about the toughness and masculinity of our leaders remained at the center of American politics. Will the media continue to define our leaders, and will leaders and the public continue to allow themselves to be defined, in these narrow terms? Given the persistent masculine tradition in American politics and society, the answer is probably yes. And yet a century or even little more than a generation ago, who would have thought that traditional images of racial superiority and inferiority could be challenged with considerable success, that racist beliefs and practices could be at least diminished?

If we cannot clearly foresee it, we must surely hope for a time when the political leaders of America—and the men of the press who help fashion them—spend less energy defining and defending gendered turf. Should that day come, politicians, the press, and the public will have more energy for more important social issues than the state of American masculinity. ★

Bruce Curtis, author of *William Graham Sumner*, is a professor of American thought and language at Michigan State University.