

THE SON, THE MOON, AND THE STARS

The Promise of Postwar Manhood

WHEN I LISTEN TO THE SONS BORN after World War II, born to the fathers who won that war, I sometimes find myself in a reverie, conjured out of my own recollections and theirs. The more men I talk to, the more detailed this imagined story becomes. It is the story of a boy in bed pretending to sleep, waiting for his father. Tonight, the father has promised to reveal to the son a miraculous inheritance: the transit of an artificial star.

The door opens, and the hall light streams in, casting a cutout shadow man across the bedroom floor. For a moment, from the boy's vantage point, his father seems almost unreal, a flattened spectral image. Then the shadow moves forward into the room, hustling the boy into a jacket over his cowboy pajamas, arming him with a big chrome flashlight, digging out his Keds from under a heap of clothes in the closet. The boy pulls the coat around him and, even though it is August, feels wrapped in a delicious and unexpected comfort, enveloped in his father's hushed exuberance.

Earlier that evening, while his mother was busy scraping dishes in the kitchen, the boy and his father had hunched conspiratorially over the latest issue of *Life* magazine, the father pointing out features of the fantastical orb they were to observe, just the two of them, at an hour

later than the boy had ever been allowed to be awake: *Ten stories high! Seven times as bright as the North Star!* His father said the satellite was really more of a balloon, a "sateloon," and told him how it had been clamped down with huge clothespins and folded into an egg-shaped magnesium sphere for the launch; how the shell had hatched open, right on time, when it reached its orbit, a mighty man-made explosion giving birth to a big, shiny beach ball called Echo. His father had said Echo's skin was half the thickness of the cellophane wrap on his cigarette pack; a meteorite could puncture it, even the sun's rays might disturb its course. *It could collapse at any moment!* And it was this that would linger in the boy's mind: that something so powerful could be so fragile.

The boy, clutching his flashlight and his Davy Crockett cap, races after his father along the shadowy upper hallway past the bedroom where his mother lies sleeping, then down the stairs and through the living room where the blank eye of the new Philco TV gazes coolly upon their passage. On a sticky July evening a month ago, he had sat in front of the Philco with his parents and watched a young presidential nominee on a confetti-strewn proscenium turn his face ceremonially to the west and call on the "young men" of a "new generation" to join "a race for the mastery of the sky." It was up to boys like him, the man had said, to save not just the Earth but the "far side of space" from a Communism that had already "penetrated into Asia."

He follows his father through the kitchen, the Frigidaire thrumming in the darkness, out the screen door and down the steps, where the aluminum patio furniture and the shiny globe of the barbecue grill phosphoresce like flying saucers come in for a landing. They are on the black-green quarter acre of clipped lawn now. His father bends, spreading his old navy peacoat like a blanket on the buzz-cut grass. The man and the boy in his raccoon cap kneel on the scratchy wool, two pioneers of the crabgrass prairie, and then the father snaps off the boy's flashlight. All the familiar moorings drop away and they are swept up, a father and a son, into the bright sky. The father touches the boy's shoulder and directs his vision to a faraway glimmer. The boy looks up, knowing that his father is pointing out more than just an object; it is a beacon of pride and secret knowledge, a paternal gift rocketing him into a future his father has helped to launch. At first, all he sees is the blanket of stars spreading out cold and vast between the trees. But then, there it is at last, a pinpoint of light crawling across the firmament, infinitesimally tiny, impossibly bright.

I KNEW THIS BOY. Like everyone else who grew up in the late 1950s and early 1960s, I knew dozens of him. He was Bobby on the corner, who roamed the neighborhood with his cap gun and holster, terrorizing girls and household pets. He was Ronnie, who wore his Superman suit way past Halloween and, sure he could fly, leaped from his living-room stairs one day and cracked his head open on the foyer linoleum. He was Frankie, who blew off part of his pinkie while trying to ignite a miniature rocket in the schoolyard. Even if he wasn't brought out into the backyard and shown an American satellite glinting in the sky, he was introduced to the same promise and the same vision, and by such a father. The fathers of that era often seemed remote, as unreal as those perfect dads on television, though not intentionally so. They were just fathers in the era after the war, living in brand-new suburbs with wives and children they barely knew, working at brand-new jobs on brand-new corporate "campuses," miles from their brand-new aluminum-sided houses. Which is to say that the life of the postwar father was altogether too newly out of the box for him to understand it, much less explain it to his son.

Many of these fathers were veterans of World War II or Korea, but their bloody paths to virility were not ones they sought to pass on, or usually even discuss. Because the fathers offered few particulars about their "baptisms" at Normandy or Midway or Heartbreak Ridge, war was a remote romance that each boy had had to embellish with details culled from Sergeant Rock and his combat adventures in DC comics, or Sergeant Bilko and an endless procession of television war series (*Crusade in Europe*, *Crusade in the Pacific*, *Victory at Sea*, *The Big Picture*), or later, GI Joe and his miniature arsenal.³ Not that paternal knowledge of the war, even if shared, could have helped those sons, whose male proving grounds were to be on peaceful terrain. This was to be the era of manhood *after* victory, when the pilgrimage to masculinity would be guided not by the god of war Mars, but by the dream of a pioneering trip to the planet Mars. The satellite: here was a visible patrimony. And so Echo, with its reflective shell floating one thousand miles above the earth, became a remote point of triangulation connecting one generation of men to the next, and a visual marker of vaulting technological power and progress to be claimed in the future by every baby-boom boy. The men of the fathers' generation had "won" the world and now they were giving it to their sons. Their nation had come into its own, powerful, wealthy, dominant, in control of the greatest destructive force ever imagined. The fathers had made their sons masters of the universe and it felt, as in the time of Alexander, that what they had created would last forever.

1. The American Century Versus the Century of the Common Man

FOUR DECADES LATER, as the nation wobbled toward the millennium, its pulse-takers seemed to agree that a domestic apocalypse was under way: American manhood was under siege. Newspaper editors, TV pundits, fundamentalist preachers, marketers, legislators, no matter where they perched on the political spectrum, had a contribution to make to the chronicles of the "masculinity crisis." Right-wing talk-radio hosts and left-wing men's-movement spokesmen found themselves uncomfortably on common ground. MEN ON TRIAL, the headlines cried. THE TROUBLE WITH BOYS, ARE MEN NECESSARY?, MAYBE MANHOOD CAN RECOVER. Periodicals of every political stripe from the conservative *Weekly Standard* (THE CRISIS OF MANTLINESS) to *Newsweek* (WHITE MALE PARANOIA) to the progressive *Time Reader* (MEN: IT'S TIME TO PULL TOGETHER) banneted the crisis on their covers. Newspaper and broadcast journalists raced to report on one young-male hot spot after another: Tailhook, the Citadel, the Spur Posse, South Central gangsters, high-desert skinheads, militia-men blowing up federal buildings and abortion clinics, schoolyard shooters in Arkansas, Mississippi, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Oregon, and Colorado.

In the meantime, the media's softer lifestyle outlets happily turned their attention to male-crisis-*lite*: the retreat to "gentlemen's" cigar clubs and lap-dancing emporiums, the boom in male cosmetic surgery and the abuse of steroids, the bonanza of miracle hair-growth drugs and the brisk sales of Viagra. Social scientists from right, left, and center pontificated on "endangered" young black men in the inner cities, Ritalin-addicted white "bad boys" in the suburbs, "deadbeat dads" everywhere, and, less frequently, the anguish of downsized male workers. Social psychologists and researchers issued reports on a troubling rise in male distress signals stretching over the last several decades— anxiety and depressive disorders, suicides and attempted suicides, physical illnesses, certain criminal behaviors—and a "mortality gap" that was putting the average man in his grave seven years before the average woman.⁸ And by century's end political pundits seemed incapable of discussing anything *but* the president's supposedly dysfunctional masculinity; they contemplated Bill Clinton's testosterone level and many credentials (Too much or not enough? Office lech or military virgin?) as if his Y chromosome was the nation's greatest blight.

Pollsters investigated the electoral habits of a new voting bloc they called "the Angry White Male" and researched the shopping choices of an emerging men-in-crisis demographic they had dubbed as early as the

late eighties "the Contenders" or, less charitably, "the Change Resisters." Marketers hastened to turn the crisis into entertainment and profits—from TV shows like *Men Behaving Badly* to sporting-goods sales of T-shirts that proclaimed DESTROY ALL GIRLS or WIRE BEATER (a retail phenomenon described in one newspaper headline as CASHING IN ON THE BAD BOY IMAGE) to advertising campaigns meant to salve the crisis-ridden male's wounds like Brut's aftershave slogan for the nineties, "Men Are Back!" And by the hundreds of thousands, men without portfolio confirmed the male-crisis diagnosis, convening in Washington for both the black Nation of Islam-led Million Man March and a largely white, evangelical-led Promise Keepers rally entitled, hopefully, "Stand in the Gap."⁹

If so many concurred in the existence of a male crisis, consensus collapsed as soon as anyone asked the question: Why? Not that there was a shortage of responses. Everyone proposed a favorite whipping boy—or, more often, whipping girl—and blame-seekers on all sides went after their selected culprits with righteous and bitter relish.

As a feminist and a journalist, I began investigating this crisis where you might expect a feminist journalist to begin: at the weekly meetings of a domestic-violence group. Wednesday evenings in a beige stucco building a few blocks from the freeway in Long Beach, California, I attended a gathering of men under court order to repent the commission of an act that stands as the emblematic masculine sin of our age. What did I expect to divine about the broader male condition by monitoring a weekly counseling session for batterers? That men are by nature brutes? Or, more optimistically, that the efforts of such a group might point to methods of managing or even "curing" such beastliness? Either way, I can see now that I was operating from an assumption both underexamined and dubious: that the male crisis in America was caused by something men were *doing* unrelated to something being done to them, and that its cure was surely to be found in figuring out how to get men to *stop* whatever it was. I had my own favorite whipping boy, suspecting that the crisis of masculinity was caused by masculinity on the rampage. If male violence was the quintessential expression of masculinity run amok, out of control and trying to control everything in its path, then a domestic-violence therapy group must be at the very heart of this particular darkness.

In my defense, I wasn't alone in such circular reasoning. Shortly after declaring my intention to investigate American masculinity, I was besieged with suggestions along the same lines from journalists, feminists, antifeminists, and other willing advisers. Women's-rights advocates

mailed me news clips about male office stalkers and computer harassers. A magazine editor urged me to explore the subject of men on offshore oil rigs—"a real bastion of retrograde masculinity!" he said with curious enthusiasm. A fellow reporter, also a man, repeatedly called to alert me to horrific acts of male criminality; he had spotted in the paper, serial rapists and killers were particular favorites. That I was not ensconced in the courtroom for O. J. Simpson's murder trial struck many of my volunteer helpers as an appalling lapse of judgment. "The perfect case study of an American man who thinks he's critiqued to just control everything and everybody," one of them suggested.

But by the time of the Simpson trial, I had already been attending the domestic-violence group for several months—the very group O. J. Simpson was, by coincidence, supposed to have attended but avoided with the promise that he would speak by phone to a psychiatrist—and it was already apparent to me that whatever the crisis was, it did not stem from a preening sense of entitlement and control. The two counselors who ran the group, which was called Alternatives to Violence, worked hard to make "control" a central issue. Each new member would be asked to describe to the group what he had done to a woman, a request that was generally met with sullen reluctance, vague references to "the incident," and invariably the disclaimer "I was out of control." The counselors would then expend much energy showing him how he had, in fact, been in control the entire time. He had chosen his fists, not a knife; he had hit her in the stomach, not the face; he had stopped before landing a permanently injurious blow, and so forth. One session was devoted to reviewing "The Power and Control Wheel," a mimeographed chart that enumerated the myriad ways men could victimize their mates. No doubt the moment of physical contact for these men had grown out of a desire for supreme control fueled by a need to dominate. I cannot conceive of a circumstance that would exonerate such violence. By making the abusive spouse take responsibility for his actions, the counselors were pursuing a worthy goal. But the logic behind the violence still remained elusive.

A serviceman who had turned to nightclub bouncer jobs and pasty catering after his military base shut down seemed to confirm the counselors' position one evening shortly before his "graduation" from the group. "I denied it before," he said of the night he pummeled his girlfriend, who had also worked on the base. As he spoke he studied his massive, callused hands, lying uselessly on his lap. "I thought I'd blacked out. But looking back at that night when I bear her with an open hand, I didn't black out. I was feeling good. I was in power, I was strong, I

was in control. I felt like a *man*." But what struck me most strongly was what he said next: that moment of control had been the only one in his recent life. "That feeling of power," he said, "didn't last long. Only until they put the cuffs on. Then I was feeling again like I was no man at all."

He was typical in this regard. The men I got to know in the group had without exception lost their compass in the world. They had lost or were losing jobs, homes, cars, families. They had been labeled outlaws but felt like castoffs. Their strongest desire was to be dutiful and to belong, to adhere with precision to the roles society had set out for them as men. In this respect, they were prototypical modern wife beaters, who, demographic research suggests, are commonly ill equipped to fulfill the requirements of expected stereotypical sex roles, men who are socially isolated, afflicted with a sense of ineffectuality, and have nothing but the gender rule book to fall back on.

There was something almost absurd about these men struggling, week after week, to recognize themselves as dominators when they were so clearly dominated, done in by the world. "That 'wheel' is misnamed," a laid-off engineer ruefully told the counselors. "It should be called the Powerlessness and Out-of-Control Wheel." The men had probably felt in control when they beat their wives, but their everyday experience was of feeling controlled—a feeling they had no way of expressing because to reveal it was less than masculine, would make each of them, in fact, "no man at all." For such men, the desire to be in charge was what they felt they must do to survive in a nation that *expected* them to dominate.

Underlying all the disagreement over what is confusing and unnerving to men runs a constant line of thinking that blinds us—whatever our political beliefs—to the nature of the male predicament. Ask feminists to diagnose men's problems and you will often get a very clear explanation: men are in crisis because women are properly challenging male dominance. Women are asking men to share the public reins and men can't bear it. Ask antifeminists and you will get a diagnosis that is, in one respect, similar. Men are troubled, many conservative pundits say, because women have gone far beyond their demands for equal treatment and now are trying to take power and control away from men. Feminists are "feminazis," in their view, because they want to command every sphere once directed by men, from deportment in the boardroom to behavior in the bedroom. The underlying message: men cannot be men, only eunuchs, if they are not in control.

Both the feminist and antifeminist views are rooted in a peculiarly modern American perception that to be a man means to be at the controls and at all times to feel yourself in control. The popular feminist

joke that men are to blame for everything is just the flip side of the "family values" reactionary expectation that men should be in charge of everything. The problem is, neither of these views corresponds to how most men feel or to their actual positions in the world. The year I spent at the domestic-violence group, as it turned out, wasn't a diversion. It illuminated a dynamic in men's lives that indeed causes trouble, but it was the reverse of what I expected. Everywhere men look, even in a therapy session intended to offer men "alternatives to violence," they are told that there is no alternative: they must be at the helm.

The man controlling his environment is today the prevailing American image of masculinity. A man is expected to prove himself not by being part of society but by being untouched by it, soaring above it. He is to travel unfettered, beyond society's clutches, alone—making or breaking whatever or whoever crosses his path. He is to be in the driver's seat, the king of the road, forever charging down the open highway, along that masculine Möbius strip that cycles endlessly through a numbing stream of movies, TV shows, novels, advertisements, and pop tunes. He's a man because he won't be stopped. He'll fight attempts to tamp him down; if he has to, he'll use his gun. It seems to us as if it has always been thus, ever since the first white frontiersman strode into the New World wilderness, his rifle at the ready.

But a look at our history, long since buried under a visual avalanche of Marlboro Men and Dirty Harrys and Ramboes, suggests a more complicated dynamic, one in which from the nation's earliest frontier days the man in the community was valued as much as the loner in control, homely society as much as heroic detachment. Even in the most archetypal versions of the original American male myth, a tension prevailed between the vision of a man who stood apart from society and the man who was a part of society; the loner was not the ideal. The "Indian fighter" was ultimately a homesteader. In its genesis, the story of Daniel Boone was not simply a tale of a frontiersman taming the world with his rifle and knife. Essential to the myth of his journey into the wilderness was his return from it to retrieve his family and establish a new community. John Filson, the author who first mythologized Boone's life in the late eighteenth century, was adamant on this point, as frontier historian Richard Slotkin observes: "For Filson, Boone's solitary hunting trips are, not ends in themselves, but means to a social end. Solitude has value in the Boone narrative only insofar as it contributes to the ultimate creation of a better society; hunting is noble only insofar as it clears the way for husbandry." Or, in words attributed to Boone in his as-told-to-Filson autobiography of 1784: "Thus we behold Kentucke, lately an howl-

ing wilderness, the habitation of savages and wild beasts, become a fruitful field; this region, so favourably distinguished by nature, now become the habitation of civilization." Conquering "savages" on that uncultivated frontier was only half the story, and not necessarily the important half. "Soon after," Boone recounted of his earliest forays into the hinterland, "I returned home to my family with a determination to bring them as soon as possible to live in Kentucke, which I esteemed a second paradise, at the risk of my life and fortune."⁸ The risk only had meaning because it meant something for the future of his family and his society.

Historian E. Anthony Rotundo has observed in *American Manhood* that men of the colonial and Revolutionary eras "especially were judged by their contribution to the larger community. Before 1800, New Englanders saw a close link between manhood and 'social usefulness.' . . . Men who carried out their duties to family and community were men to admire." A study of heroic male figures in late-eighteenth-century periodicals similarly found that the perceived key to masculinity was "public usefulness." The hunter in the saddle, untethered from public life, was regarded as only half a man. He was the outsider whose blood-letting served no social purpose, the lone killer who kept on killing because there was nothing else to do. He was the "frontier wastrel," as literary historian Vernon Louis Parrington wrote of Davy Crockett in 1927, "but one of thousands who were wasting the resources of the Inland Empire, destroying forests, skinning the land, slaughtering the deer and bear, the swarms of pigeons and turkey, the vast buffalo herds. Davy the politician is a huge western joke, but Davy the wastrel was a hard, unlovely fact."⁹

In industrializing nineteenth-century America, however, the wastrel would begin to gain a certain renown as an emblem of virility, his rapaciousness evidence of his ambitious, rags-to-riches drive, his heaps of dead pelts the equivalent of the tycoon's consolidated fortunes, his killer instinct compensating for the loss of service to a community. To be a man increasingly meant being ever on the rise, and the only way to know for sure you were rising was to claim, control, and crush everyone and everything in your way. "American manhood became less and less about an inner sense of self, and more and more about a possession that needed to be acquired," Michael Kimmel has observed in *Manhood in America*. Davy Crockett was elevated to the masculine pantheon, along with Wild Bill Hickok, Jesse James, and Captain Carver, the last famed in his time for slaughtering more buffalo in one day than any other man ever had—and leaving miles of carcasses behind him. Long forgotten was the final

appeal to God by the Quaker-bred Daniel Boone in his autobiography, to "banish the accursed monster, war, from all lands, with her hated associates, rapine and insatiable ambition."¹⁰

Even as the ethic of solo ambition gained ground, social utility remained a competing index of American manhood. The federal government would call on it in times of national emergency, and the quality of "publick usefulness" would continue to be longed for, however quietly, in the hearts and imaginations of individual men. At the tail end of the Gilded Age, novelist Frank Norris critiqued the prevailing culture in *McTeague*, the story of a giant-size, inept dentist driven by a predatory "ambition"—"to have projecting from that corner window a huge gilded tooth, a molar with enormous prongs"—who meets his demise in Death Valley chained to the corpse of the rival he has murdered. Norris expressed what many believed privately about the new ideal of Darwinian manhood—that it led to a sterile and self-destructive violence, that the "survival of the fittest" when applied to modern man might mean the survival of no one.¹¹

But such critiques were in the minority, and later in our century would be nearly drowned out by images of virility generated by the overpowering new mediums of film and television. In his incarnation as a cleaned-up Walt Disney television character in 1955, Davy Crockett would eclipse Daniel Boone for good. His "appearance" in a three-part series on the popular program *Disneyland* set off a real-life mass slaughter, as the marketplace raced to meet the runaway demand for raccoon hats by doing in much of the continent's raccoon population. In the popular imagination, Boone had dissolved into Crockett; actor Fess Parker would portray them both for Disney, each in a coonskin cap, oblivious to the fact that the real-life Boone had declined to wear what he viewed as the haberdashery of the uncivilized brute.¹² The new King of the Wild Frontier would rule his era along with his advertising doppelgänger, the Marlboro Man, who was likewise no settler, just a mute icon presiding over an emptied-out Western landscape. In the new mass-marketed wilderness, a cast of heroic outriders triumphed over and over against the backdrop of Death Valley and Monument Valley and all the other never-to-be-populated valleys of the Wild West. They were men judged by their ride out into the wasteland, not their return; they were measured by the control they achieved over their environment through gunplay, not husbandry. The essential question to be resolved, in episode after episode, sequel after sequel, was not whether our hero had been socially engaged and useful, but whether he had maintained control and survived. And so modern debates about male angst are invariably diverted by

that old issue of control in the wilderness. What gets discussed is how men are exercising or abusing their control and power, not whether a lack of mooring, a lack of context, is causing their anguish. ARE MEN REALLY THAT BAD? was how *Time* magazine sniffily defined the central question in a 1994 cover story, memorably illustrated by a man sporting a business suit, a wedding ring, and a pig's snout for a face.¹³ While the image indicted a swinish wallowing in dominance, it left unexamined the American man's more common experience of fear at losing the job that requires the business suit, the family for whom he wears the ring, any context in which to embed his life. If men are the masters of their fate, what do they do about the unspoken sense that they are being mastered, in the marketplace and at home, by forces that seem to be sweeping away the soil beneath their feet? If men are mythologized as the ones who *make things happen*, then how can they begin to analyze what is *happening to them*?

More than a quarter century ago, women began to suspect in their own lives "a problem with no name." Even the most fortunate woman in postwar, suburban America, maneuvering her gleaming Hoovermatic across an expansive rec room, sensed that she'd been had. Eventually, this suspicion would be expressed in books—most notably Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*—that traced this uneasiness back to its source: the cultural forces of the mass media, advertising, pop psychology, and all the other "helpful" advice industries. Women began to free themselves from the box in which they were trapped by feeling their way along its contours, figuring out how it had been constructed around them, how it was shaped and how it shaped them, how their reflections on its mirrored walls distorted who they were or might be. Women were able to take action, paradoxically, by understanding how they were acted upon. "Women have been largely man-made," Fya Fyges wrote in 1970 in *Patriarchal Attitudes*.¹⁴ What had been made by others women themselves could unmake. Once their problems could be traced to external forces generated by a male society and culture, they could see them more clearly and so challenge them.

Men feel the contours of a box, too, but they are told that box is of their own manufacture, designed to their specifications. Who are they to complain? The box is there to showcase the man, not to confine him. After all, didn't he build it—and can't he destroy it if he pleases, if he is a man? For men to say they feel boxed in is regarded not as laudable political protest but as childish and indecent whining. How dare the kings complain about their castles?

Women's basic grievances are seen as essentially reasonable; even the

most bluster, antifeminist these days is quick to say that, of course, he favors equal pay and equal opportunity. What women are challenging is something that everyone can see. Men's grievances, by contrast, seem hyperbolic, almost hysterical; so many men seem to be doing battle with phantoms and witches that exist only in their own overheated imaginations. Women see men as guarding the fort, so they don't see how the culture of the fort shapes men. Men don't see how they are influenced by the culture either; in fact, they prefer not to. If they did, they would have to let go of the illusion of control.

Today it is men who cling more tightly to their illusions. They would rather see themselves as battered by feminism than shaped by the larger culture. Feminism can be demonized as just an "unnatural" force trying to wrest men's natural power and control from their grasp. Culture, by contrast, is the whole environment we live in; to acknowledge its sway is to admit that men never had the power they imagined. To say that men are embedded in the culture is to say, by the current standards of masculinity, that they are not men. By casting feminism as the villain that must be defeated to validate the central conceit of modern manhood, men avoid confronting powerful cultural and social expectations that have a lot more to do with their unhappiness than the latest sexual harassment ruling.

The very paradigm of modern masculinity—that it is all about being the master of your universe—prevents men from thinking their way out of their dilemma, from taking active political steps to resolve their crisis. If they are the makers of history, not the subjects of historical forces, then how can they rise up? Even those most sympathetic to men's anguish recoil from seeing their problems politically. Herb Goldberg's 1977 book *The Hazards of Being Male* was among the first in the men-in-distress genre to acknowledge that men lead their lives "in harness." Nonetheless, Goldberg typically rejected any solution that would snap the harness. "There could be no movement for men like the women's movement," he wrote in a foreword to the tenth-anniversary edition. To hold out hope "that men's problems could be solved with external answers and solutions," he warned, was just "fueling fantasies."⁵

Goldberg, like others, assumed men's problems to be internal. Yet clearly masculinity is shaped by society. Anyone wondering how mutable it is need only look at how differently it is expressed under the Taliban in Kabul or on the streets of Paris. Witness men walking with their arms wrapped around each other in Istanbul or observe the Mexican immigrant to Los Angeles whose manhood is so linked to supporting a family that any job, even a busboy's, holds a masculine pride. As anthropologist

David D. Gilmore demonstrated in *Manhood in the Making*, his comprehensive cross-cultural survey of masculine ideals, manliness has been expressed as laboring-class loyalty in Spain, as diligence and discipline in Japan, as dependence on life outside the home in the company of men in Cyprus, as gift-giving among Sikhs, as the restraint of temper and the expression of "creative energy" among the Gisu of Uganda, and as entirely without significance to the 'ahitians. "Manliness is a symbolic script," Gilmore concluded, "a cultural construct, endlessly variable and not always necessary."⁶

It should be self-evident that ideas of manhood vary and are contingent on the times and the culture. Despite that, contemporary discussion about what bedevils men fixes almost exclusively on the psychological and the biological. Whatever troubles a man must be an essential aspect of that individual, a problem of testosterone surges, sperm counts, Ritalin dosages, or the scars of inadequate mothering. To alleviate his distress, he need only get a prescription for Viagra or a lifetime gym membership or reconnect with the Wild Man "lying at the bottom of his psyche" or "The King Within," as two popular books that tryify the fare in the new "men's studies" sections instruct. (The coauthors of *The King Within*, a therapist and a Jungian psychoanalyst, even advised male readers that to remasculinize themselves they should collect pictures of Egyptian pharaohs and "imagine yourself inside the pyramid, or imagine it inside of you, perhaps in the chest area.")⁷ The man in crisis need only picture himself a monarch, pump up, armor himself, go up against the enemy, and prove that he's in control.

Women faced their problem-with-no-name by breaking their isolation and organizing. The solutions offered to men generally require them to see themselves in ever more isolated terms. Whatever troubles the American man, the outlets of mass culture from Hollywood to pop psychology to Madison Avenue tell him, can be cured by removing himself from society, by prevailing over imaginary enemies on an imaginary landscape, by beating a drum in the woods until he summons the "deep masculine," by driving ever faster on an empty road. Instead of collectively confronting brutalizing forces, each man is expected to dramatize his own struggle by himself, to confront arbitrarily designated enemies in a staged fight—a fight separated from society the way a boxing ring is roped off from the crowd. It is a fight that society watches and may applaud but does not participate in and has no influence over.

Popular accounts of the male crisis and male confusions are almost unrelentingly ahistorical. The conditions under which men live are ignored and men themselves are reduced to a perennial Everyman—as women

were a century ago, when the phrase "the Woman Question" was invoked to refer to their perplexing sex in the ethereal singular. How would men's problems be perceived, though, if we were to consider men as the subjects of their world, not just its authors? What if we put aside for a time the assumption of male dominance, put away our feminist rap sheet of men's crimes and misdemeanors, or our antifeminist indictment of women's heist of male authority, and just looked at what men have experienced in the past generation? God is the only being who has no history. Even the most "powerful" man has had at least as much happen to him as he has made happen.

WHAT DID HAPPEN to the men of postwar America?

Ernie Pyle might have told us. He was the World War II journalist whose stories from the front turned the GI for a time into an American male ideal. If the French revolutionaries of the 1790s cast their struggle in iconographic terms that were essentially maternal—Marianne as Liberty in Delacroix's later painting, breast bared and bearing her standard into battle—Americans of the 1940s scold their icons the other way. A band of marines struggling to erect a flagpole in the flinty ground of Iwo Jima would become the supreme expression of the nation's virtue. A team of anonymous, duty-bound young men successfully completing the mission their fathers and their fathers' fathers had laid out for them, defeating a vile enemy and laying claim to a contested frontier—this would be the template for postwar manhood. The United States came out of World War II with a sense of itself as a *masculine* nation, our "boys" ready to assume the mantle of national authority and international leadership. The nation claimed an ascendancy over the world, men an ascendancy over the nation, and a male persona of a certain type ascendancy over men.

There was nothing fancy about that type, not in the beginning at least. Ernie Pyle chose to sing not of the silk-scarfed fighter pilots but of the unsung infantrymen, "the mud-rain-frost-and-wind boys," as he called them in his daily columns, which, more than any of the other wartime dispatches, determined how Americans saw and remembered the Second World War. The appellation was made visual in Bill Mauldin's wartime cartoons of Willie and Joe, his "dogface" soldiers, characters for whom, as the artist noted, "the bags under their eyes and the dirt in their ears are so similar that few people know which is Willie and which is Joe." Mauldin, himself an infantry "doggie" during the Italian campaign, "loved to throw hooked cartoons" at the glamorous image of the Air Corps "Hying boy."⁶ In his classic World War II memoir, *To*

Hell and Back, Audie Murphy, the most decorated soldier of the war, recalled how he and his GI buddies literally threw hooks (of the left and right variety) at a group of drunken airmen they encountered in a café in Rome, after mocking them with a serenade of their version of "Junior Birdman":

And when they make a presentation,
And hand out those wings of tin,
You too can be a Junior Birdman—
If you'll send those box tops in.⁷

For Ernie Pyle, though, something more than home-team chauvinism inspired his praise of the men on the ground. "Goddamn all big shots," he once said to a friend, summing up his view of men who call attention to themselves, who make public spectacles out of their individual "achievements." Prewar, Pyle wrote what was probably the nation's first aviation column in the *Washington Daily News*, and even then he was suspicious of macho displays: his daily air-flight reports eschewed the antics of stuntmen and speed-demon record breakers for the quiet dedication of the men who braved storms and poor navigational equipment to deliver the mail. Pyle also loathed writing about Hollywood. "It's all I can do to face a movie star," he told a friend. "They make me sick." During the war, he refused to dote on airborne Hollywood-esque heroes. Let the rest of the media go gaga over the glittering "flyboy." For Pyle, the mud-caked private was more man than any pilot would ever be. "War makes strange giant creatures out of us little routine men who inhabit the earth," Pyle wrote, speaking of himself as much as of the men with whom he marched. "They live and die so miserably and they do it with such determined acceptance that your admiration for them blinds you to the rest of the war."⁸

Pyle's view became the official one. Government radio propaganda dubbed the conflict the "little guys' war." At war's end, General Dwight D. Eisenhower pronounced: "All in that gigantic fighting machine agree in the selection of the one truly heroic figure in that war. He is GI Joe.... He and his platoon leaders have given us an example of loyalty, devotion to duty, and indomitable courage that will live in our hearts as long as we admire those qualities in men." By Eisenhower's voice and Pyle's typewriter, the foot soldier was elevated into a masculine emblem—a man who proved his virility not by individual feats of showy heroism but by being quietly *wegil* in conducting a war and supporting the welfare of his unit. "We are all men of new professions out in some strange night caring for each other," Pyle wrote. Each "little routine

man" was part of a team that shared a common mission, his manhood coming from contributing to something bigger than himself. "The men didn't talk any," Pyle wrote of the 9th Infantry Division as he accompanied the unit during its assault on the port city of Cherbourg, north of the Normandy beachheads. "They just went. They weren't heroic figures as they moved forward one at a time, a few seconds apart. . . . They weren't warriors. . . . They were American boys who by mere chance of fate had wound up with guns in their hands. . . . They were afraid, but it was beyond their power to quit. They had no choice. They were good boys."²⁴

In the forge of his daily columns, Ernie Pyle took these frightened good boys and made them, in the eyes of the nation, into men. The template for this man-making process was Pyle's most famous column, "The Death of Captain Waskow," a tribute to a beloved, paternal company commander. "After my own father," Pyle quoted one of his sergeants as testifying, "he came next."²⁵ The prevailing narrative fashioned from the battlefronts of World War II, laid out in countless columns, newsreels, and movies, was a tale of successful fatherhood and masculine transformation: Boys whose Depression-era fathers could neither provide for them nor guide them into manhood were placed under the benevolent wing of a vast male-run orphanage called the army and sent into battle. There, firm but kindly senior officers acting as surrogate fathers watched over them as they were tempered into men in the heat of a heroic struggle against malevolent enemies. A father-son rupture in the nation had been healed: the boys, saved and molded into men, would return to find their wives, form their families, and take their places as adult men in the community of a nation taking its place as a grown-up power in the world.

This was the story America told itself in dozens of war movies in which tough but tenderhearted commanding officers prepared their apprentice "boys" to assume their responsibilities in male society. It was the theme of the 1943 film *Guadalcanal Diary*, where the boys ship out, tussling playfully with one another like a bunch of mismatched kittens, and then shed their differences in a marine family presided over by a fatherly captain and a fatherly Father. "Great bunch of kids, Father," the captain says proudly to the priest. "They'll do all right." It was the theme behind the 1949 film *Sands of Iwo Jima*, with John Wayne as Sergeant Stryker, a stern papa molding his wet-behind-the-ears charges into a capable and adult fraternity. "Before I'm through with you, you're gonna move like one man and think like one man," he tells them. "If I can't teach you one way, I'll teach you another, but I'm gonna get the

job done." And he does, fathering a whole squad of youngsters into communal adulthood.

It was the dream of a male society to minister to its boys in the context, ironically enough, of war, and turn them into men through tenderness, not brutality. A nation that had been birthed by metaphorically orphaned Sons of Liberty, and a nation in which, more recently, a generation of unemployed fathers had been unable to provide for their families, emerged from World War II with the conviction that it had at last forged a father-son bond strong enough to prove a foundation for the domestic peace to come.

The transition was celebrated on August 14, 1945, V-J Day, when the war ended in victory over Japan. President Harry Truman declared a two-day holiday. Across the country, joyous citizens welcomed returning troops with impromptu parades, spontaneous street dancing, and christenings of shredded-phone-book confetti, champagne, and water. Women raced to shower the GIs with "kissing from coast to coast," as *Life* put it in a famous two-page photo spread on "the osculatory gamut." In Manhattan, two million celebrants crammed into Times Square, while in Brooklyn, Italian-American mammas and papas set up tables on the street and plied their young heroes with food and wine. "We are faced with the greatest task we've ever been faced with," the president declared from the lawn of the White House to cheering throngs. He called on the nation's returning men to tackle the responsibilities of rebuilding a free nation and world. "It is going to take the help of all of us to do it. I know we are going to do it."²⁶ Was there ever such a national moment of masculine certainty, so ringingly recognizing the American boy's transport into a state of manhood—a state where his passage was cheered, his contribution called essential, the nation's faith in his ability to keep on "doing it" boundless?

By lionizing the grunt, Ernie Pyle inadvertently became an architect of what many hoped postwar manhood would become. The promise was that wartime masculinity, with its common mission, common enemy, and clear frontier, would continue in peacetime. By 1950, a quasi-militarized peacetime economy and a national security state had arisen in America. Within the context of the cold war, the postwar man, too, seemed to share with his cohorts a common mission of prevailing in a struggle against Communism on the battlements of Europe, throughout Asia, at home, and even on the frontiers of outer space. Like GI Joe, he would be judged not on his personal dominance but on his sense of duty, his voluntary service to an organization made up of equally anonymous men. The dog soldier would continue to have his day.

WORLD WAR II, HOWEVER, would prove not the coronation of this sort of masculinity but its last gasp. The model Ernie Pyle limned in his columns he had crafted during the Great Depression, while touring small-town and rural America chronicling the quiet struggles of Alabama sharecroppers and Mississippi shrimp-cannery workers, Oklahoma ditch-diggers and Great Plains Dust Bowl farmers trying to survive the nation's economic devastation. In fact, Pyle's vision owed more to the New Deal than it did to the Normandy invasion. Before he praised the GIs he was praising peacetime grunts like "the CCC boys," the young Civilian Conservation Corps workers who were showing "what man can do with mountains." The literary figure he emulated was John Steinbeck, and, long before World War II, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was his hero for the war he waged on poverty and on his own polio-paralyzed body. Observing one day in Rapid City, South Dakota, as the visiting president lifted himself into his leg braces on "his powerful arms," an emotional Pyle wrote, "I have never seen a man so straight."²⁴

The idea of a manhood embedded in and useful to an embattled society seeking to foster social welfare and equity was promoted by a New Deal America and brought to life in such mammoth efforts as the federal Works Progress Administration, which invested billions of dollars in massive projects: building schools, constructing waterworks and sewage plants, electrifying rural areas, controlling floods, reforestation, the distressed land. The WPA also employed small armies of artists, writers, actors, playwrights, and musicians, whose legacy is still with us in extraordinary murals on public buildings, literate regional and state guides, and classic plays and music. The New Deal's masculine ideal was the selfless public servant whose "satisfaction derived from sinking individual effort into the community itself, the common goal and the common end," Roosevelt's attorney general Francis Biddle wrote at the time. "This is no escape from self; it is the realization of self." And the realization of a manly self. As an artist with the Public Works of Art Project, a prototype for the WPA, wrote to President Roosevelt, this was the era when American art finally "took on a virility," because of "this golden opportunity to do our best work for our fellow countrymen." New Deal historian Arthur Ekirch, Jr., has observed, "No longer was competition considered superior to cooperation and association." The New Deal's master builder himself spelled out this newly minted masculine conception in a 1932 speech. "The man of ruthless force had his place in developing a pioneer country," Roosevelt declared, but now he is "as likely to be a danger as a help"—a danger because "the lone wolf... whose

hand is against every man's, declines to join in achieving an end recognized as being for the public welfare."²⁵

This ethic was promoted most strongly by Roosevelt's secretary of agriculture and, later, vice president Henry Wallace, an Iowa agrarian who spun a progressive dream for the nation's future around the heroic figure of the "Common Man." Wallace imagined an army of ordinary workmen who, if given a shot at decent educations, jobs, and housing, could be a force on "the new frontier" for expanded production, well-being, and democracy not only in the nation but throughout the world. The "Century of the Common Man," as Wallace dubbed it in a famous speech in May 1942, was to include both sexes, but he defined it in quintessentially masculine terms. Wallace saw America as "a boy of eighteen" who could no longer "avoid becoming a man by wearing shorts pants" and who could mature into a "grown-up United States" by stoically "shouldering our responsibility," by contributing to the needs of the world rather than simply aspiring to dominate it.²⁶ America's mission, he said, only half-jokingly, should be to ensure "that everybody in the world has the privilege of drinking a quart of milk a day." He was guided, as historian John Morton Blum has written, by "his belief in the possibility of brotherhood and the inherent virtue of husbandmen."²⁷

It was this faith in the dignity and moral decency of Common Men who would shoulder responsibility for one another—not just respond to the war cry of "Kill Kraus and Japs!"—that Ernie Pyle was struggling to keep alive first on the European and then on the Pacific front, and was hoping would survive the war. "We have won this war because our men are brave, and because of many other things," he wrote at the end of the European conflict. "We did not win it because destiny created us better than all other peoples. I hope that in victory we are more grateful than we are proud.... The dead men would not want us to gloat."²⁸

On April 18, 1945, in the final months of the war, Ernie Pyle made the mistake of poking his head out of a trench on Okinawa for a quick reportorial look around; a Japanese machine-gun bullet pierced his left temple. The "slightly used secondhand man," as Pyle referred to himself, was dead.²⁹ The day he died could well have been the day Ernie Pyle's stoical man died and the Century of the Common Man was stillborn. Only nobody knew it yet.

Toward the end of the war, two visions of postwar America vied for attention on the national stage in a battle over the nation's future that has long since been forgotten. One contender was Wallace's Common Man century; the other was Henry Luce's American Century. The fate of the world, broadcaster Edward R. Murrow wrote in August 1942,

hinged on whether the vision of Henry Wallace or Henry Luce would become "the forerunner of the American policy of tomorrow."³⁰ Luce, the founder and editor of *Time* and *Life* magazines, saw America as a masculine nation whose manifest destiny was to loom like a giant on the global stage. He proposed the average man acquire a grander sense of himself by association with a nation that would dominate the world through unapologetic force. If Wallace's manly ideal was all about parental care and nurturance, Luce's was all about taking control—and, even more important, displaying it.

"The fundamental trouble with America," Luce asserted in a classic 1941 call to arms to policy makers, which he published in *Life* and called "The American Century," was that its citizens had "failed to play their part as a world power." Luce's argument had its merits in a nation reluctant to respond to Hitler. But Luce's "cure"—"to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit"—would prove a postwar prescription for aggression. The price for failing to flex the national muscle, he warned repeatedly, would be a terrifying loss of virility: "the virus of isolationist sterility" would infect America, he wrote; we must dominate the world "or else confess a pitiful impotence."³¹

Wallace responded to Luce's call for a dominating America with his own warning: "Force is important—but it is not enough. Force without justice would sooner or later make us into the image of that which we have hated in the Nazis." Already, he observed in the early forties, such a mentality was taking its toll: "The symbols of collective security are being used to build collective aggression, the unity of the great nations against fascism is becoming a unity of the nations against communism, the ideals of the defeated have been taken over by the victors." Would we, he asked plaintively, enter a "century of blood or milk?"³²

This question had been lingering in the wings since at least the early nineteenth century. Did an American man establish his merit by nursing his nation's people or by going the world's? Was he Daniel Boone come home to tend to his community's affairs or Davy Crockett sallying forth to take his pelts? The years following World War II were not, of course, to usher in a "century of milk" and Henry Wallace himself would be one of the first victims of the rising appetite for blood. As his campaign to create sixty million jobs, support labor and civil rights, and challenge big business ran afoul of a conservativizing "get tough" Congress, Wallace would be dumped from the vice presidential ticket and replaced by Harry Truman in 1944. Four years later, after Wallace mounted an ill-advised, disastrous third-party bid for the presidency, he was deemed a Com-

munist dupe and promptly retired to the slag heap of suspect, out-of-touch progressives.³³

At first, the American Century would masquerade as a blood brother of the Century of the Common Man; it would appear to be designed to help a new generation of men become the caring good fathers that Wallace and Pyle had envisioned—and that the men themselves yearned to be. The veterans of World War II were actually more inclined toward a continuation of a common-man ethic than was the general public; they were eager to embrace a masculine ideal that revolved around providing rather than dominating. Their most important experiences centered on the support and comfort they had given one another in the war, and it was this that they wished to preserve. "Rather than being militarized by their war experience," historian Paul A. Carter observed in *Another Part of the Fight*, "the GIs to a remarkable extent had civilianized the armed forces in which they served."³⁴ As artilleryman Win Stracke told oral historian Studs Terkel in *The Good War*, he came back from the war "primarily concerned with making a living to support my new family" and bearing this most cherished memory of his service overseas: "You had fifteen guys who for the first time in their lives were not living in a competitive society. . . . There's a job to be done and everyone pitches in, some more than others. For the first time in their lives, they could help each other without fear of losing a commercial advantage. Without cutting each other's throat or trying to put down somebody else through a boss or whatever. . . . I had realized it was the absence of competition and boundaries and all those phony standards that created the thing I loved about the army."³⁵

The men who had bought into the Ernie Pyle ideal of heroically selfless manhood, the fathers who would sire the baby-boom generation, would try to pass that experience of manhood on intact to their sons in the 1950s and 1960s. The "routine little men" who went overseas and liberated the world came home to the expectation that they would liberate the country by quiet industry and caretaking. Their chances of that had already been greatly reduced with President Truman's abandonment of the Democrats' "New Bill of Rights," which would have guaranteed, among other things, full employment and equal access to food, health care, education, and housing. But the vets made the most of what remained, the GI Bill of Rights, by which unprecedented numbers of them acquired college degrees, job skills, and homes. The vets threw themselves into their federally funded educations, and later their defense-funded corporate and production-line jobs, and their domestic lives in Veterans Administration-financed tract homes. White men from midwestern

small towns and black men from the rural South moved west toward the promising oases of southern California military-backed jobs and affordable home ownership. They were hopeful that their dedication, their anonymous service, their humble loyalty to the team would add up to something larger, something sturdy and generative that they could pass on to their sons.

More than a century earlier, Alexis de Tocqueville had puzzled over a singularly American paradox. The nation's citizenry seemed "eaten up with longing to rise, but hardly any of them seem to entertain very great hopes or to aim very high."³⁶ Now it seemed that American men would all rise together, with the greatest of hopes and the highest of aims. When, in 1961, the nation's helm was taken by a young president, a World War II vet, the nation's aims seemed to rise as high as the moon. Men were buoyant with the expectation that the American Century would be their century. They were eager to show their sons how the postwar bounty would one day soon be theirs. They made a promise to their boys and they planned to make good on it. Like Sergeant Stryker in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, they vowed: "If I can't teach you one way, I'll teach you another, but I'm gonna get the job done."

II. The Unpassed Torch

THE AMERICAN PERIOD OF SOARING EXPECTATIONS that followed the close of World War II is conventionally known as the "baby boom" era, as if its defining traits were the nesting and dispersing habits of young mothers. But truly it was the era of the boy. It was the culture of *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*, of Pop Warner rituals and Westinghouse science scholarships, of BB guns and rocket clubs, of football practice and lettered jackets, of magazine ads where "Dad" seemed always to be beaming down at his scampy, cowboy-suited younger son or proudly handing his older son the keys to a brand-new tail-finned convertible. It was a father-son Eden showcased in *Life* with pictorials like the one where Dad shows Bill, nine, and Rob, eleven, "how to remove an old stoker motor from the furnace in the cellar."³⁷ It was a world where, regardless of the truth that lay behind each garden gate, popular culture led us to believe that fathers were spending every leisure moment in rounds of roughhouse play and model-airplane construction and backyard catch with their beloved boys.

In the aspiring middle-class suburb where I came of age, there was no mistaking the belief in the boy's preeminence; it was evident in the solicitous attentions of parents and schoolteachers, in the centrality of coaches and Cub Scouts and Little League, in the community life that

revolved around boys' contests and boys' championships and boys' scores—as if these outposts of tract-home America had been built mainly as exhibition rings for junior male achievement, which perhaps they had. It was evident in the periodic rampages of suburban boys that always seemed to go unchecked, the way they tore up the lawns with their minibikes or hurled rocks at newcomers with impunity or tormented the girls at the public swimming pool; inherent in their behavior was the assumption that this was their birthright—to be imperial bullies over their miniature dominions. To grow up as a girl in this era was to look on with envy, and to see the boy as being automatically entitled and powerful. Surely when we were grown, he would have the control. He would dispense the gifts. The boys believed that, too.

The speech that inaugurated the shiny new era of the 1960s was the youthful John F. Kennedy's address to the Democratic National Convention, a month before the launch of Echo. The words would become, along with his inaugural oration, a haunting refrain in adolescent male consciousness. He spoke not of the populace at large but principally of "young men"—"young men who are coming to power," "young men who can cast off the old slogans and the old delusions." What Kennedy implicitly presented was not so much a political platform as a new rite of passage for an untested male generation. "[T]he New Frontier of which I speak is not a set of promises," he told them. "It is a set of challenges." Kennedy understood that it was not enough for the fathers to win the world for their sons; the sons had to feel they had won it for themselves. If the fathers had had their chance to be GI Joes, then Kennedy would ensure that at least a few of the sons would have their shot at being Green Berets. If the fathers had their Nazis and "Nips," then Kennedy would see to it that the sons had an enemy, too. He promised as much on Inauguration Day in 1961, when he spoke vaguely but unremittably of Communism's threat, of "the prey of hostile powers," of the "hour of maximum danger," of "a long twilight struggle," and most memorably of a country that would be defined by its readiness to "pay any price" and "oppose any foe." The fight was the thing, the only thing, if America was to retain its manhood. "And let every other power know," Kennedy decreed in his inaugural address, "that this hemisphere intends to remain the master of its own house." What Kennedy was selling was a government-backed program of man-making, of federal masculinity insurance. As author Norman Mailer observed at the time: "The President has commissions and commissars and bureaus and agents and computer machines to calculate the amount of schooling needed to keep America healthy, safe, vigorous, proof against the Russians. To keep America up

[his emphasis]. Virility is the unspoken salesman in American political programs today."³⁸

The promise the president made to his nation of young men was the one the father made to the boy, the aerospace corporations made to their gray-hanneled male employees, the mission-control officials made to their astronauts, the expanded armed forces made to their cold warriors, the *Boys' Life* editors made to the readers they addressed as "space conquerors" and "rocket riders," the aeronautical-engineer dad Fred MacMurray made on TV to his three sons, the Mattel toy makers made to the young buyers of their water-powered, two-stage plastic missiles. The promise was of a spectacular ascension, a vertical demonstration of prowess that would concentrate all of the masculine force and beauty of battle into one breathtaking explosion of exploratory power and muscle. At the same time, the promise was supposed to reprise Ernie Pyle's war, in which the anonymous work of dutiful men would add up to one glorious and visible victory on a faraway frontier, a victory that would belong to all men. Admittedly, no army of GI brothers would fight on that frontier. "But in a very real sense, it will not be one man going to the moon," President Kennedy declared. "We make this judgment affirmatively—it will be an entire nation, for all of us must work to put him there."³⁹ Just to get astronaut John Glenn into orbit for the first time, *Time* reminded its readers in 1962, required "nearly 35,000 people": "Besides his fellow astronauts and a staff of 2,000 at Cape Canaveral, 15,000 men stood by for recovery or rescue operations on ships stretched across the Atlantic, 500 technicians manned 18 tracking stations on four continents and two oceans, and 15,000 scientists, technicians and factory workers who had labored for nearly four years on the space program left their imprint on the flight."⁴⁰

The promise was a mission to manhood. It borrowed its blueprint from the time-tested tenets of what might be called the national male paradigm, which had four aspects: the promise of a frontier to be claimed—the American Wild West and the wartime fronts would now become the frontier of space; the promise of a clear and evil enemy to be crushed—instead of an Indian or a Nazi, the enemy would now be a Communist; the promise of an institution of brotherhood in which anonymous members could share a greater institutional glory—in place of an army of foot soldiers it would now be a brotherhood of organization men, engineers, middle managers, and bureaucrats, as typified by the National Aeronautics and Space Agency; and finally, the promise of a family to provide for and protect—for the working war wives had now become housewives who waved from train platforms as their husbands shipped off, not for the front, but for their offices.

It took some preparation to convert the World War II model to a peacetime setting, but it was done: the federal money that had poured into airpower to win the war now poured into rocket power to win the peace; the government that financed construction and roads to support its male military force now underwrote suburban construction and highways to support its male bureaucratic workforce (and to transport cold-war troops and evacuate cities in the event of a nuclear attack).⁴¹ That the peacetime model was intended to convey a wartime urgency was evident in the name the government assigned to the domestic road-construction program: "The National System of Interstate and Defense Highways." The peacetime GI was issued an education, a swath of land and a house in strip developments like Levittown, New York, and Lakewood, California, and, often enough in an ever-expanding defense industry, a subsidized job. Rosie the Riveter, the wartime woman worker, was demobilized and sent home to become an aspiring consumer who would depend on and spend the demobilized soldier's postwar wages. Their sons would be made educationally combat-ready thanks to the National Defense Education Act, which promised \$634.4 million worth of science and math training to create a generation of rocket and missile warriors.⁴² And every new recruit on the cold-war domestic team would learn how to cheer on his side from the bleachers of the many brand-new, government-subsidized football stadiums. Implicit in all of this was a promise of loyalty, a guarantee to the new man of tomorrow that his company would never fire him, his wife would never leave him, and the team he rooted for would never pull up stakes.

These, then, were the cold warriors representing the most powerful country in the world with the strongest economic pulse recorded in all history. Wouldn't a boy in such a world have every faith in his father's patrimony, his father's promise? Wouldn't he take for granted that he, too, would be in charge of his own destiny—and his nation's?

WHEN I TALK WITH MEN WHO GREW UP DURING THE BABY BOOM, this mission to manhood shows up in their minds not as promises met but as betrayals, losses, and disillusionments. It is as if a generation of men had lined up at Cape Kennedy to witness the countdown to liftoff, only to watch their rocket—containing all their hopes and dreams—burn up on the launchpad. There had been so much anticipation, so much excitement, so many assurances that nothing could possibly go wrong. But somehow, it all had

The initial disillusionment was with the frontier. In 1957, the Russians orbited Sputnik, the first satellite, and in the United States panic ensued.

It was a "crisis," a showdown between superpowers for the control of the heavens that was supposed to have all the gravity of the Second World War. This stratospheric confrontation, the "father of the hydrogen bomb," Edward Teller, told a TV audience, was "a battle more important and greater than Pearl Harbor." *The Reporter* magazine insisted that Sputnik "is to Pearl Harbor what Pearl Harbor was to the sinking of the *Maine*." A *Life* magazine editorial went even further, equating Sputnik with "the shot heard round the world" at Lexington. The most powerful U.S. senator at the time, Lyndon B. Johnson, went verbally airborne in his declaration of high noon in the heavens. "Control of space means control of the world," he intoned. "From space the master of infinity would have the power to control the earth's weather, to cause drought and flood, to change the tides and raise the levels of the sea, to divert the Gulf Stream and change temperate climates to frigid. That is the ultimate position: the position of total control over earth that lies somewhere in outer space."⁴³

Space, however, turned out to be a place not much worth conquering. What the promoters of space exploration did not or chose not to understand was a frontier's role. It was not simply an empty field where men left behind civilized comforts and faced danger; it was a place where men faced peril for a reason. They were there to claim territory to be occupied by a domestic population that would follow. This "return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line," as Fredrick Jackson Turner put it in his famous lament over the closing of the West in 1890, created the conditions for a "perennial rebirth"—a rolling rite of passage in which male pioneers become settlers and pillars of new communities.⁴⁴

But space was a sterile environment, not a place where women and children could or would want to settle. To explore space was to clear the way for no one, to be cut off from a society that had no real investment in following. Nor was space a place of initiation, of virile secrets, of masculine transformation. There was no one there to learn from or to fight. It was a void that a man moved through only passively, in a state of almost infantile regression. The astronaut was a dependent strapped to a couch in a fetal position, bundled in swaddling clothes. He made it through space only by never breaking the apron strings of mission control back on Mother Earth. An astronaut returned from space unchanged by the experience, because there was no experience. No wonder that, for all the promotional effort expended on space, by the time Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon, Americans were already suppressing a yawn over the adventures of their new heroes.⁴⁵

When the boy got older, he was at last presented with his own war, in Southeast Asia, but it was hardly the crucible of courage against a clear and visible enemy that his father had faced. There was nothing clear about any of it, not the nature or the identity of the enemy, not the mission, not where they should be shooting or who was shooting at them, and certainly not the meaning of victory. Nor was this a "masculine" war in the World War II mode. There were no landings, no front lines, no ultimate objectives. It was essentially a war against a domestic population, against families, where huts were burned with Zippo lighters, cattle slaughtered, children machine-gunned—a war in which the most remembered grunt leader was not a benevolent Captain Waskow but Lieutenant William Calley, a callow young man known only for going on a murderous rampage of monstrous proportions at My Lai. It was a war in which the most remembered pronouncement was a U.S. major's explanation for the obliteration of Ben Tre: "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it."⁴⁶

Then the boy came home—whether from Saigon or Kent State—to the domestic continuation of a guerrilla war. Now the contested village was his own, the village he thought he was defending. He was greeted on his return by women not blowing kisses but indifferent or even hostile to his efforts. These women did not leave their jobs upon his arrival; many of them didn't accept or accepted only resentfully a renewed dependency upon him, because about the time the men were off trying to prove their manhood by liberating an "oppressed" people or clashing with the National Guard, their wives and girlfriends had decided to liberate themselves. The loved one whom the man imagined himself supporting and protecting was often doing just fine on her own, and she didn't much appreciate his efforts to assert his authority. In fact, sometimes his wife now saw *him* as the oppressor.

And finally, as the boy grew older, the institutions that had promised him a masculine honor and pride in exchange for his loyalty double-crossed him. In truth, the fix was in from the start: corporate America's promise to continue the World War II GI's wartime experience of belonging, of meaningful engagement in a mission, was never authentic. The massive bureaucracies of postwar "white collar" employment, especially the defense contractors fat on government largesse, were replete with make-work jobs with inflated titles. Their vast middle managements were filled with functionaries who often didn't even know what they were managing, who suspected they weren't really needed at all. What these corporations were offering was a secure job, not a vital role. And ultimately even that would prove a lie. There was to be no lifetime

security at McDonnell Douglas or Lockheed or IBM or even in the military itself. There were to be no iron-clad union protections. The postwar grunts' submission to the national-security state would, after a prosperous period of historically brief duration, be rewarded with insecurity and pink slips, with massive spasms of downsizing, restructuring, union-breaking, contracting-out, and outsourcing. The institutions that men had identified with no longer identified with them. Even hometown sports teams repaid their fans' devotion by hurriedly packing up and racing to other cities dangling brand-new, deluxe, and rent-free stadiums and a 100 percent take on tickets and concessions.

The frontier, the enemy, the institutions of brotherhood, the women in need of protection—all the elements of the old formula for attaining manhood had vanished in short order. The boy who had been told he was going to be the master of the universe and all that was in it found himself master of nothing. How had this happened in such a brief period of time?

III. The Violent and the Perfumed

IN 1957, THREE years before boys across the country watched as Echo passed overhead, another small American male was caught in the act of musing on the heavens. He was the lead character in a sci-fi film released in the year of Sputnik's launch. In *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, Scott Carey has a good job, a suburban home, a pleasure boat, a pretty housewife. His is the quintessential life envisioned by the GI Bill of Rights and underwritten by the beneficence of a brotherly corporation—in this case, literally so; Scott Carey works for his brother. And yet, after he passes through a mist of atomic radiation while on a boating vacation in the Pacific, something happens. As he tells his wife in horror, "I'm getting smaller, Lou, every day."

As Scott Carey quite literally shrinks, the promises made to him are broken one by one. The employer who was to give him lifetime economic security fires him. His wife, Louise, becomes his protector until he gets lost in the cellar of their house and she presumes he's been gobbled by their house cat. He is left with only feminine defenses—to hide in a dollhouse, to fight a giant spider with a sewing pin. And it turns out that the very source of his diminishment is implicitly a military atomic test by his own government. His only hope, his brother tells him as he lays him off, is to turn himself into a celebrated freak and sell his story to the media. "I'm a big man!" Scott Carey says with bitter sarcasm. "I'm famous! . . . One more joke for the world to laugh at." In the end,

the shrinking man finds himself, like the boy in my reverie, beneath a vault of stars, gazing into the galaxy. But he is alone and the firmament he beholds is empty, without evidence of man's technological promise. No blip of man-made light blinks reassuringly across the night sky. "What was I?" the shrinking man beseeches the silent heavens. "Was I still a human being? Or was I the man of the future?"

The more Scott Carey shrinks, the more he strikes out at those around him. The tinner he gets, the greater his combativeness becomes—and his desire for a combatant to defeat. His obsession with regaining dominance turns him into, as he puts it, a "caricature" of a man. "Every day I became more tyrannical," he comments, "more monstrous in my domination of Louise." It's a line that would ring a bell for any visitor to the Alternatives to Violence group and for any observer of the current male scene. As the male role has diminished amid a sea of betrayed promises, many men have found themselves driven to more dominating and some even "monstrous" displays in their frantic quest for a meaningful showdown.

If few men would do what Shawn Nelson did one evening in the spring of 1995, many could relate. A former serviceman whose career in an army tank unit had gone nowhere, a former plumber who had lost his job and whose tools had been stolen, a former husband whose wife had left him, the thirty-five-year-old Nelson broke into the National Guard armory, commandeered a fifty-seven-ton M-60 army tank, and drove it through the streets of San Diego—flattening fire hydrants, crushing forty cars, downing traffic lights and enough utility poles to cut off electricity to five thousand people. He was at war with the domestic world that he once thought he was meant to build, serve, and defend. His world had turned inside out. He was going to drive that tank he had been meant to command if it killed him. And it did. The police shot Shawn Nelson to death through the turret hatch, even though his tank had ground to a halt, struck on a three-foot-tall concrete highway divider, even though he was unarmed. The police explained to the press later that if he had gotten the tank under way again, traffic would have been "endangered."⁴⁷

If a man could not get the infrastructure to work for him, he could at least tear it down. If the nation would not provide an enemy to fight, he could go to war at home. If there was to be no brotherhood, he would take his stand alone. Shawn Nelson's sense of desperation, if not his actions, were shared by many men of his generation. Like the incredible shrinking man, they could feel their stature dwindling along with

their spheres of influence—any day now, they feared, they would wake to find themselves misplaced in the cellar. If so many men seemed to be seeking an enemy to subdue, it was because they could conceive of no other path that might lead them up and out of their present mess. All the pillars of the male paradigm had fallen, except the search for the enemy.

From the start, that search had been at the heart of Luce's American Century. It was, ultimately, what the American Century was all about. By century's end, it had turned into a search for someone to blame for the premature death of masculine promise. The longer the search went on, the more frantic and desperate the searchers became. What began in the 1930s as an intemperate pursuit of Communists in the government bureaucracy, in the defense industries, in labor unions, the schools, the media, and Hollywood, would eventually become a hunt for a shape-shifting enemy who could take the form of women at the office, or gays in the military, or young black men on the street, or illegal aliens on the border, and from there become a surreal "combat" with nonexistent black helicopters, one-world government, and goose-stepping U.N.-peacekeeping thugs massing on imaginary horizons. A handful of men would attempt to gun down enemies they imagined they saw in family court, employee parking lots, McDonald's restaurants, the U.S. Congress, the White House, a Colorado schoolhouse, and, most notoriously, a federal office building in Oklahoma. A far greater number would move their destruction of the elusive enemy from the real world to the fantasy realm—to a clear-cut and controllable world of action movies and video combat, televised athletic tournaments and pay-per-view ultimate-fighting bouts.

But none of it would satisfy, because the world and the fight had changed. In Ernie Pyle's terms, the real fight was no longer between the GIs and the Nazis, but between men on the same side—the mud-caked soldiers and the glamorous pilots. And this fight hadn't turned out the way that Pyle would have liked.

Pyle's legacy includes a film about his exploits that lives on in the American consciousness, *The Story of G.I. Joe*. The journalist to whom (as his editor once said) "the very word 'Hollywood' meant fraud" would be celuloided.⁴⁸ During wartime, Pyle found his rising celebrity back home a horrible burden. The mobs of autograph seekers and photographers, the offers of lecture tours and radio programs, the prying questions of *Time* editors preparing a cover story about the man they called "a sort of prose Charlie Chaplin," the demands to endorse cigars, sit for sculptors, and pose for layouts in women's beauty magazines, the whole

"frenzied goldfish life" sent the man who owned only one suit and rolled his own smokes fleeing back to the army.⁴⁹ In front of the spotlight, he felt strangely depleted. But soon after his burial, the man who hated Hollywood became a Hollywood icon.

Originally, the movie based on Pyle's collected columns (for which Arthur Miller was hired to write the screenplay's first draft) was supposed to honor the grunts who the army contended had been slighted in Hollywood's depictions of wartime heroes.⁵⁰ The grunts—even the grunts in the movie—were aware of being shortchanged. "The flyers are the guys you guys always write about, right?" a GI observes caustically to Pyle as the movie opens. "The Hollywood heroes. We're just the lumps along for the ride. That's all, just for the ride." While they appreciate Pyle's attentions and understand him to be a grunt sympathizer, they also know that he is a journalist and so a new kingmaker, a celebrity anointer whether he wants to be or not. And this is the story the movie unintentionally tells. As the grunts trudge by, they call out to Pyle, "Hey, how do I get my name in the paper?" They look to him as a bridge to the world of recognition, but also fear that the bridge is not for them. When Pyle wins the Pulitzer Prize for his coverage, the soldiers' kudos have an acid aftertaste. They crumple up the congratulatory telegram and toss it at him, then bow down and address him mockingly as "our hero." They sense that he is becoming one of the flyboys, that they will lose him to the world of glamour. *The Story of G.I. Joe* turned out to be less about the fight between Allies and Axis than about the postwar battle to come over who would be the Man of the Century, the grunt or the flyboy, the Common Man or Superman, anonymous men expecting the mantle of masculine honor for their loyalty to a common cause or a few glamorous men who understood intuitively that in the coming media and entertainment age the team of men at work would be replaced by the individual man on display.

The handful of men plucked arbitrarily from the anonymous crowd and elevated onto the new pedestal of mass media and entertainment glamour were unreachable. That wasn't because they were necessarily arrogant or narcissistic, though some would surely become so; they simply existed in a realm from which all lines to their brothers had been cut. In this sense, the astronaut was emblematic, the most celebrated postwar flyboy. He was supposed to be the representative man, experiencing space for all his brethren. But the many men who supported him would no more share the experience or the limelight than would the "organization men" whose company loyalties turned them into wallpaper, unseen backing for the corporation's real star: its brand name. The space

shot would launch only a handful of big shots into the media heavens; the rest would fall off the monitors of mission control, consigned to the outer space of noncelebrity.

The fathers had led the sons to believe that space exploration would hold up a mirror into which any American man could look and see himself reflected in enlarged form. Echo, like its namesake, the nymph of Greek mythology who fell in love with Narcissus, was supposed to glorify them by beaming around the globe their every word. Like the other technological achievements of NASA, McDonnell Douglas, and military-industrial America in general, the satellite and the rocket were supposed to magnify the average man's presence in the world. Some of the sheen from the huge new machines put out by huge new institutions was supposed to make him feel huge, too. But the images in those mirrors turned out to have a televisable life of their own and the best that any man could do was try to reflect them. The night the boy had watched the satellite arc over his backyard, his father had told him that Sputnik was the enemy—an enemy America would vanquish. But decades later, as the grown son gazed out his window into his own backyard, where a beached satellite dish brought him ninety-nine channels and no opportunities for stardom, a more likely scenario began to take shape in his mind: perhaps Echo had vanquished *him*.

If the failure to find a new frontier or a clear enemy or women in need of protection was devastating, it was accompanied by yet another problem for which the grant fathers had never prepared their sons. The men of the new generation had not simply lost a utilitarian world; they had been thrust into an ornamental realm, and the transformation had proved traumatic. I'm not speaking simply of the economic shift from industry to service, which is a shift from heavy-lifting "masculine" labor to "feminine" aid and assistance, nor about a shift from a society organized around industry to one set up around electronic technology. And I'm not speaking simply about the irony of men supporting a massive military-industrial effort to produce machines—computers, robots, smart bombs—that ultimately would replace them, lifting them into space while making them increasingly expendable on the ground. Those changes were only surface symptoms, for we have changed fundamentally from a society that produced a culture to a culture rooted in no real society at all. The culture we live in today pretends that media can nurture society, but our new public spaces, our "electronic town squares" and "cyber-communities" and publicity mills and celebrity industries, are disembodied barrens, a dismal substitute for the real thing. Where we once lived in a society in which men in particular participated by being

useful in public life, we now are surrounded by a culture that encourages people to play almost no functional public roles, only decorative or consumer ones. The old model of masculinity showed men how to be part of a larger social system; it gave them a context and it promised them that their social contributions were the price of admission to the realm of adult manhood. That kind of manhood required a society in order to prove itself. All of the traditional domains in which men pursued authority and power—politics, religion, the military, the community, and the household—were societal.

Ornamental culture has no such counterparts. Constructed around celebrity and image, glamour and entertainment, marketing and consumerism, it is a ceremonial gateway to nowhere. Its essence is not just the selling act but the act of selling the self, and in this quest every man is essentially on his own, a lone sales rep marketing his own image with no paternal Captain Waskows to guide him. In an age of celebrity, the father has no body of knowledge or authority to transmit to the son. Each son must father his own image, create his own Adam.

Ornamental culture has proved the ultimate expression of the American Century, sweeping away institutions in which men felt some sense of belonging and replacing them with visual spectacles that they can only watch and that benefit global commercial forces they cannot fathom. Celebrity culture's effects on men go far beyond the obvious showcasing of action heroes and rock musicians. The ordinary man is no fool: he knows he can't be Arnold Schwarzenegger. Nonetheless, the culture reshapes his most basic sense of manhood by telling him as much as it tells the celebrity that masculinity is something to drape over the body, not draw from inner resources; that it is personal, not societal; that manhood is displayed, not demonstrated. The internal qualities once said to embody manhood—surefootedness, inner strength, confidence of purpose—are merchandised to men to enhance their manliness. What passes for the essence of masculinity is being extracted and bottled—and sold back to men. Literally, in the case of Viagra.

It is not, as conventional media wisdom would have it, that contemporary men are vain or the products of a "self-absorbed" sixties generation that didn't appreciate their fathers' war-forged discipline and sacrifice, but rather that the culture they live in has left men with little other territory on which to prove themselves besides vanity. The culture they are stranded in was birthed by their fathers' generation. What gets left out of the contemporary nostalgia of baby-boom men for their World War II fathers—evidenced in the huge appetite for the film *Saving Private Ryan* and books like Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation*—is

what those fathers did *after* the war. When *Dateline* NBC produced a special documentary based on Brokaw's book, celebrating the World War II "rougher than tough" heroes, especially relative to their pampered sons, the troubling and perhaps unintentional subtext was how devastatingly *unf*athered those sons were, how un nourished and how inadequately prepared for manhood they felt they were by the "heroic" men who were their fathers. One of those sons in the documentary, Frank Kilmer, moved across the country and into a Buddhist monastery, trying desperately to blaze his own way to manhood, eventually becoming a plumber, but he was still haunted by the knowledge of the patrimony denied him by a "distant" father: "To be brutally honest, I have been a major disappointment to him," he said of his father.⁵¹ Left implicit was how deeply his father may have disappointed him.

The younger Kilmer's disappointment was presaged in, of all places, a John Wayne film, *Sands of Iwo Jima*, made, like many of the actor's war films, in the years *after* the war. At closer inspection, the character repeatedly played by Wayne personifies less the World War II officer than the *postwar* father figure: remote, unreadable, an enforcer of conformity, a cold-war man. As Garry Wills astutely observed in *John Wayne's America*, Wayne's on-screen persona may have appealed to so many postwar boys both because he's an implacable authority figure and because "an affective link" is formed between Wayne and his young costars "precisely from the refusal to show affection." Silence supposedly conveys love, his films suggest. "Wayne was both an alternative to that parent and an excuse for him," Wills wrote.⁵² And unlike many of their fathers, Wayne often dropped his guard and revealed a touch of humanity in the final frame. When Wayne's Sergeant Stryker dies in the closing scene of *Sands of Iwo Jima*, his grunts find in his pocket an unfinished letter to his son. It is the beginning of a paternal confession: as a father, Stryker testifies in the note, "I've been a failure in many ways." These are the words that real postwar sons like Frank Kilmer so needed to hear. In truth, despite all their wartime heroics, the fathers abandoned their sons, however inadvertently, in an image-based, commercial-ruled world that they had largely created in their postwar haste to embrace the good life. The fathers had their reasons—years of deprivation in the Depression followed by the brutal hardships of World War II—but what they bestowed was a culture where the sons could not exercise the sorts of traditional manhood that the fathers so judgmentally endorsed. Symbolically speaking, what the fathers really passed on to their sons was not the GI ethic but the GI Joe "action figure," a twelve-inch shrunken-man doll whose main feature was his ability to accessorize.

The fathers did give the sons a New Frontier, but it was a land made sterile by the onrush of mass consumerism. The more productive aspects of manhood, such as building or cultivating or contributing to a society, couldn't establish a foothold on the shiny flat surface of a commercial culture, a looking glass before which men could only act out a crude semblance of masculinity. And what act could be more crudely and stereotypically masculine than a show of violence? But while violence uses all the visible aspects of male utility—strength, decisiveness, courage, even skill—its purpose is only to dismantle and destroy. Violence stands in for action but is also an act of concealment, a threatening mask that hides a lack of purpose. In a way, our culture replicated Davy Crockett's wilderness, where a man had nothing to do but consume (in Crockett's case, wild animals), and no way to make that consumption seem masculine except to present it as an aggressive triumph. Crockett, too, was putting on a show; his boasts—105 bears killed in a year! Hand-to-fist combat with a twelve-foot-long "monstrarious great Cat-Fish"—were propaganda in an early image war.⁵³

As early as 1963, Norman Mailer observed glimmerings of the new desperado mandate. "[I]t was almost as if there were no peace," he wrote, "unless one could fight well, kill well (if always with honor), love well and love many, be cool, be daring, be dashing, be wild, be wily, be resourceful, be a brave gun. And this myth, that each of us was born to be free, to wander, to have adventure and to grow on the waves of the violent, the perfumed, and the unexpected, had a force which could not be tamed. . . . Indeed a quarter of the nation's business must have depended upon its existence."⁵⁴ As men's utilitarian qualities were de-throned, as their societal roles diminished, violence more and more came to serve as the gang leader for a host of rogue masculine traits.

By the end of the American Century, every outlet of the consumer world—magazines, ads, movies, sports, music videos—would deliver the message that manhood had become a performance game to be won in the marketplace, not the workplace, and that male anger was now part of the show. An ornamental culture encouraged young men to see surliness, hostility, and violence as expressions of glamour, a way to showcase themselves without being feminized before an otherwise potentially girlish mirror. But if celebrity masculinity enshrined the pose of the "bad boy," his rebellion was largely cosmetic. There was nowhere for him to take a grievance because there was no society to take it to. In a celebrity culture, earnestness about social and political change is replaced by a pose of "irony" that is really just a sullen and helpless paralysis.

The images produced by the culture, however, still promote the model

of an American man who dominates his world. If anything, such images have been inflated as superstars prevail, again and again, on athletic courts, the battlefields and cityscapes of giants. For the ordinary man, however, there is less and less to control beyond his remote-control device, and ever fewer venues in which he can harness the energies of his masculinity productively. He is still expected to dominate, but when mastery of a trade and mastery over one's life fade as possibilities, all that may seem to be left is raw dominance. The urge to control, unharassed and unmoored, soon spins out of control. Without a society, Daniel Boone would have been just a killer. It was this dead end that faced not only the many men who got shoved aside by celebrity culture but the few who were elevated in it. Boxer Mike Tyson equated that elevation with imprisonment. As he remarked from the penitentiary after he had been convicted of raping Desiree Washington: "Maybe I don't think I want to be a big star no more. . . . I don't like living where— which I found out here—everybody is a potential enemy."⁵⁵

It's often been observed that the economic transition from industry to service, or from production to consumption, is symbolically a move from the traditional masculine to the traditional feminine. But in gender terms, the transition is far more than a simple sex change and, so, more traumatic for men than we realize. A society of utility, for all the industriputable ways that it exploited men's health and labor, and in an industrial context broke the backs and spirits of factory workers and destroyed the lungs of miners, had one saving grace: it defined manhood by character, by the inner qualities of stoicism, integrity, reliability, the ability to shoulder burdens, the willingness to put others first, the desire to protect and provide and sacrifice. These are the same qualities, recoded as masculine, that society has long recognized in women as the essence of *motherhood*. Men were publicly useful insofar as they mastered skills associated with the private realm of maternal femininity. Like mothers tending selflessly to their babes, men were not only to take care of their families but also their society without complaint; that was, in fact, what made them men. Masculinity as "a nurturing concept" was one of the few continuities anthropologist David Gilmore found in his cross-cultural study.⁵⁶ A maternal conception of manhood was precisely what Henry Wallace had in mind when he compared the Common Man who served in World War II to "a she-bear who has lost a cub."⁵⁷

In a culture of ornament, by contrast, manhood is defined by appearance, by youth and attractiveness, by money and aggression, by posture and swagger and "props," by the curled lip and petulant sulk and flexed biceps, by the glamour of the cover boy, and by the market-battered

"individuality" that sets one astronaut or athlete or gangster above another. These are the same traits that have long been designated as the essence of feminine *vanity*, the public face of the feminine as opposed to the private caring, maternal one. The aspects of this public "femininity"—objectification, passivity, infantilization, pedestaler-perching, and mirror-gazing—are the very ones that women have in modern times denounced as trivializing and humiliating qualities imposed on them by a misogynist culture. No wonder men are in such agony. Not only are they losing the society they were once essential to, they are "gaining" the very world women so recently shucked off as demeaning and dehumanizing.

The old American male paradigm can offer no help to a man competing with ghostly, two-dimensional armies of superathletes, gangsta rappers, action heroes, and stand-up comedians on television. Navigating the ornamental realm, much less trying to derive a sense of manhood from it, has become a nightmare all the more horrible for being virtually unacknowledged as a problem. At the close of the century, men find themselves in an unfamiliar world where male worth is measured only by participation in a celebrity-driven consumer culture and awarded by lady luck. There is no passage to manhood in such a world. A man can only wait to be discovered, and even if he lucks out, his "achievement" is fraught with gender confusion for its "feminine" implications of glamour and display.

The Ernie Pyle movie was right. The man of the future was to be the flyboy, not the grunt. Ernie Pyle's model of manhood would not hold past the Eisenhower presidency. Eisenhower would be replaced by a PT-boat captain who had sought duty on a vessel where he could be the lone star, rather than service on a big ship where he would have been anonymous. Kennedy's one wartime "rescue" mission would be repackaged to mark the first Hollywood-style glamour candidacy, but that was only the beginning of the transition.⁵⁸ By 1980, the new president would be Ronald Reagan, a man who only went to war in the movies. By 1996, Bob Dole, a candidate who had been GI Joe incarnate, would lose the presidential race to a man who famously didn't go to war at all. That election was not an embrace of a man's considered decision to refuse military service, for which Bill Clinton was excoriated, but a rejection of the foot soldier as a serviceable model of American manhood. By the waning of the nineties, despite all the celebrity encomiums to the Private Ryans and their "greatest generation," it was patently evident that this exemplar of masculinity would have no place in the century to come. Bob Dole was consigned to shilling erectile-dysfunction cures. Few could deny now what John Kenneth Galbraith had asserted three

decades earlier in his book *The New Industrial State*: "By all but the pathologically romantic, it is now recognized that this is not the age of the small man."³⁹

IV. Cause Without a Rebel

A QUESTION THAT HAS PLAQUED FEMINISTS like myself is the nature of male resistance to female change. Why are so many men so disturbed by the prospect of women's independence? Why do so many men seem to begrudge it, resent it, fear it, fight it with an unholy passion? The question launched my inquiry. But in the end, much to my surprise, it was not the question that most compelled me. It is not the question, finally, that drives this book. Because the more I explored the predicament of postwar men, the more familiar it seemed to me. The more I consider what men have lost—a useful role in public life, a way of earning a decent and reliable living, appreciation in the home, respectful treatment in the culture—the more it seems that men of the late twentieth century are falling into a status oddly similar to that of women at mid-century. The fifties housewife, stripped of her connections to a wider world and invited to fill the void with shopping and the ornamental display of her ultrafemininity, could be said to have morphed into the nineties man, stripped of his connections to a wider world and invited to fill the void with consumption and a gym-bred display of his ultra-masculinity. The empty compensations of a "feminine mystique" are transforming into the empty compensations of a masculine mystique, with a gentleman's cigar club no more satisfying than a ladies' bake-off, the Nike Air Jordan no more meaningful than the Dior New Look.

And so my question changed. Instead of wondering why men resist women's struggle for a freer and healthier life, I began to wonder why men refrain from engaging in their own struggle. Why, despite a crescendo of random tantrums, have they offered no methodical, reasoned response to their predicament? Given the untenable and insulting nature of the demands placed on men to prove themselves in our culture, why don't men revolt?

Like many women, I was drawn to feminism out of a desire to challenge the silence of my sex. It has come to seem to me that, under all the rantings of men seeking to drown out the female voice, theirs is as resounding a silence. Why haven't men responded to the series of betrayals in their own lives—to the failures of their fathers to make good on their promises—with something coequal to feminism? When the frontier that their fathers offered them proved to be a wasteland, when the enemy their fathers sent them to crush turned out often to be

women and children trembling in thatched huts, when the institutions their fathers claimed would buoy them downsized them, when the women their fathers said wanted their support got their own jobs, when the whole deal turned out to be a crock and it was clear that they had been thoroughly stiffed, why did the sons do nothing?

The feminine mystique's collapse a generation earlier was not just a crisis but a historic opportunity for women. Women responded to their "problem with no name" by naming it and founding a political movement, by beginning the process of freeing themselves. Why haven't men done the same? This seems to me to be the real question that lurks behind the "masculinity crisis" facing American society: not that men are fighting against women's liberation, but that they have refused to mobilize for their own—or their society's—liberation. Not that traditional male roles are endangered, but that men themselves are in danger of not acting.

Many in the women's movement and in the mass media complain that men just "don't want to give up the reins of power." But that would seem to have little applicability to the situations of most men, who individually feel not the reins of power in their hands but its bit in their mouths. What's more likely is that they are clinging to a phantom status. A number of men I interviewed, as they argued for the importance of having a male head of the household, tellingly demoted that to an honorary post: it's important, they would say, that every home have a "figurehead." But even the natural reluctance to give up a position of putative superiority, no matter how compromised, is not enough to explain a deeper male silence.

To understand why men are so reluctant to break with the codes of manhood sanctioned in their childhood, perhaps we need to understand how strong the social constraints on them are. It's not just women who are bombarded by cultural messages about appropriate gender behavior. In the past half century, Madison Avenue, Hollywood, and the mass media have operated relentlessly on men, too. The level of mockery, suspicion, and animosity directed at men who step out of line is profound, and men respond profoundly—with acquiescence. But that is not a wholly satisfying explanation either, for haven't women, the object of such commercial and political manipulation, kicked over these traces successfully?

If men do not respond, then maybe it is because their society has proposed no route for them to venture down. Surely the culture has not offered an alternative vision of manhood. No one has: not the so-called men's movement, which clings to its dusted-off copies of *Grimm's Fairy*

Tales and its caveman clichés; not conservative or liberal political leaders who call for a remilitarized model of manhood with work camps and schools run by former generals; not the Promise Keepers or Nation of Islam ministers, whose programs of male contrition and resurrection are fantasies of past fantasies; not a gay culture, which, as it gets increasingly absorbed into the larger commercial culture, becomes increasingly muted in its challenge of masculine roles; not even the women's movement, which clamors for men to change but has yet to conceptualize that change. But then, did feminists wait upon men to craft their revolution for them? Didn't the women's movement make its own way, without any assistance—no, with much resistance—from the dominant culture? So why can't men act? The ultimate answer has deep ramifications not only for men but for feminists. Eventually I came to believe that, far from being antagonists, they were each poised at this hour to be vital in the other's advance. But that answer came at the end. First I had to begin.

V. Ground Zero

AT THE START, guided by the most visible flares of troubled masculinity, I visited and eventually moved to southern California. In the early 1990s it seemed like the epicenter of "toxic masculinity," to use a phrase then much favored in the press. And it proved a good place to be, just not in the way I had initially imagined.

When I first arrived in southern California, the economy was in tatters. The downsizing in the region was harsher than in many other areas of the United States. The recession was deeper and had gone on longer in an economy dependent on a relatively small number of enormous defense-related corporations. California's trials were useful exaggerations, as were other signals from the margins of male experience, whether the rage of deserted Midwest football fans or the militia vengefulness over the immolated Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. One man consumed with that latter event, a self-described "patriot" and avid fisherman, once explained this societal dynamic to me in terms of a river: "If you want to see what's happening in the stream called our society, go to the edges and look at what's happening there, and then you begin to have an understanding—if you know how a stream works—of what's going on in the middle," he said. "You have to be very careful not to mischaracterize what you're witnessing as 'fringe elements,' thus assuring the listener that he's okay because it's not about him, which is bullshit." And so the stories of the underemployed, contracted-out, and laid-off men of southern California, and their counterparts in other regions I

visited, illuminated more general male losses, losses that the later "boom" economy would to some extent conceal, but not cure.

The economic improvement spelled little relief for the men I had come to know at job clubs, "retraining" agencies, family-service centers on military bases, and outplacement offices set up by aerospace companies like McDonnell Douglas. It was little relief even for those men who finally found jobs. Something had been broken inside them, and it wasn't going to be made right by a boom based on inflated stock-market prices and temporary personnel—a boom that yielded great wealth to the already affluent and decided to the average man an insecure job, a rise in status anxiety, and a mound of credit-card debt (which, by 1998, had contributed to a sevenfold increase in the rate of personal bankruptcies since 1980).⁶⁰ A categorical shift had occurred and it threatened bedrock concepts of American manhood. A social pact between the nation's men and its institutions was collapsing, most prominently but not exclusively within the institutions of work. Masculine ideals of loyalty, productivity, and service lay in shards. Such codes were seen as passé and their male subscribers as vaguely pathetic. Loyalty meant you were too slow or too stupid to skip out on the company before it skipped out on you. Productivity was something corporations and their shareholders now measured not by employee elbow grease but by how many employees the company laid off. And service meant nothing more than consumer assistance, exemplified by a telemarketer trapped in a cubicle, a phone glued to his ear, his have-a-nice-day conversations preformulated and monitored. Such a profound and traumatic transformation affected all men, whether they lost their jobs or simply feared losing them, whether they drowned or floated in the treacherous new currents. In the course of my travels, I would meet men amply rewarded by the quicksilver, image-based new economy, men who, nonetheless, felt, as they would say to me time and again, "emasculated" by the very forces that elevated them.

I didn't, however, move down to Los Angeles to interview unemployed adult men. What actually brought me there and preoccupied me initially was the misbehavior of boys. The adults, their fathers, were almost a curious afterthought, even if an inevitable one. You could say that I stumbled on the fathers by way of the sons. At first, the fathers were like the unmentioned missing persons in boys' adventure tales. The sons I met seemed to exist in a strange self-generated bubble. The fathers, when enlisted for comment, seemed more often like baffled on-lookers than interested parties. It was as if they were passing some

horrible wreck on their way to work. The fathers and sons appeared to be living in parallel universes. And because our image and media culture is fascinated with youth, the sons' universe was the one that attracted the camera crews.

Judging by the headlines, Los Angeles was the prime exporter of carcinogenic young manhood, from the sexually predatory Spur Posse to the parent-killing Menendez brothers, from teenage gang warriors to the youthful-looking ski-masked bank robbers who blazed away with AK-47s on a North Hollywood shopping strip.⁶⁴ Sometimes, the "bad boy" was seen as a literal L.A. export: YOUTH GANGS FROM WEST COAST BECOME ENTREPRENEURS IN NEW YORK, the *New York Times* warned its readers in the summer of 1997; the Bloods were "slowly but surely . . . migrating eastward," using the city's jails "as a beachhead," and had already committed "at least 135 random slashings on the city streets as part of their initiation rite." (Six months later, the paper admitted to a false alarm: "Police officials, sociologists and gang experts say there is no real gang presence in the city," the *Times* reported, attributing the hysteria to mysterious "widespread rumors.")⁶⁵ But the bad boy was just as frequently a shipment wrapped in celluloid and airbrushed in advertising campaigns, where what had just been demonized about him could now be glamorized, his exaggerated criminality repackaged for profit, the sexual predator made sexual object. The media's nightmare visions of "wilding" boys with Mac-tos would become the commercial daydreams of Hollywood and Madison Avenue, as snarling young gangsters and rapists re-formed into long-lashed Tupac Shakur matinee idols and sulky-lipped Marky Mark pinups. The Nike-shod thug with his predatory "attitude" and the bare-chested Calvin Klein poster boy with his gigantic tented underwear rivaled the Marlboro cowboy's spurs for preeminence along the Sunset Strip's billboard gulch. The perfumed junior hoodlum became the prevailing male icon, lord of the unzipped flies.

A legion of media reports titillated readers with overwrought tales of bad-boy marauders. *Time's* September 1994 cover story WHEN KIDS GO BAD presented an apocalyptic portrait of a system overwhelmed "by pint-size drug runners and by 16-year-old gunmen." One such pipsqueak, unidentified, posed for another *Time* cover story, A BOY AND HIS GUN, clutching a firearm, his face covered by an outlaw bandanna. *Newsweek* beat the same drum with a cover story, WILD IN THE STREETS, warning of "a virtual 'epidemic' of youth violence." A *U.S. News & World Report* cover story, KIDS WHO KILL, gasped at "the stone-hearted ethos of an astonishingly large segment" of teenage boys. The story would be the same no matter what newspaper or magazine you read it in. A Fort

Lauderdale *Sun-Sentinel* headline intoned, THE MISBEHAVIOR OF BOYS HAS TURNED INTO A SCARY NATIONWIDE CRISIS, while Cleveland's *Plain Dealer* deployed "a generation that some dub 'the young and the ruthless'" and Long Island's *Newsday* served up ROUGH BOYS, a feature article filled with youngsters who offered such quotes as, "It's like I'm a beast."⁶⁶

Boys preoccupied politicians. Federal hearings were convened to denounce the lawless behavior of young men. Congress pursued military solutions, doubling the number of junior ROTC programs in high schools and pumping millions of dollars into boot camps for dropouts and mini-military academies on inner-city campuses.⁶⁷ State legislators drafted padding bills; government officials backed curfews and "get tough" policies that made possible the prosecution of teenage boys as adults.⁶⁸ And Los Angeles led the way, with its city attorney at one point seeking a dusk-to-dawn curfew and even a "pass law" for juveniles, and its cops swooping down on the streets as part of Operation Hammer, a dragnet that, between 1988 and 1991, in combination with similar efforts by the sheriff's department, picked up tens of thousands of young minority men. The arrests were often for dubious reasons: in at least one sweep, after the media departed, the police released more than 90 percent of their "suspects" without charges.⁶⁹

In his 1994 State of the Union address, President Bill Clinton singled out the beastly boy as a prime source of national moral decline. "We cannot renew this country," he said, "when thirteen-year-old boys get semiautomatic weapons to shoot nine-year-olds for kicks." In public-opinion polls, Americans expressed a conviction that the greatest cause of crime and violence was young men; a majority called for the execution of teenagers convicted of homicide.⁷⁰

While youth crime was indeed on the rise, it was hardly at the "epidemic" levels or of the vicious quality that the media had claimed. Juveniles were arrested for less than 15 percent of the murders and about 18 percent of violent crimes in the 1990s; and in spite of massive press coverage of schoolyard shootings, FBI statistics showed no actual increase in children arrested for murder.⁷¹ As social scientist Mike Males found in *The Scapgoat Generation*, arrests of teenage boys were rising far more than their actual crimes, and the increase in crimes was actually a function of increasing poverty, not youth. In the eighties and nineties, young people disproportionately suffered the most dramatic rise in poverty.⁷² Yet the public fathers were determined to crack down on their "criminal" sons. Recrimination seemed the last abiding tie in a time when the worlds of fathers and sons were drifting apart like separating continents, when an entire generation of male elders seemed to have little

to bequeath their boys in the way of masculine skill and mastery and community leadership, when the fathers were alone in the new world, too, and knew only that they were expected to dominate.

While boys may not have been the murderous monsters painted by media's demonologists, they were clearly in some sort of trouble and anxious to admit their transgressions in the confessional of the press. What lay behind these transgressions, however, was barely examined. The economic and social roots of young male pathology were largely overlooked by a media that preferred other culprits: testosterone, drugs, "permissive" or neglectful working parents (which, either way, almost always meant Mom), or, increasingly by the decade's end, feminism. The women's movement was a favorite target when the press and its pundits turned their attention to the troubles of *white* boys. (Black and Hispanic boys, by contrast, were generally seen as a gun-and-crack-dealing army assaulting an innocent nation.) "With all the attention devoted to our daughters over the past decade, are our sons falling by the wayside?" *Newsweek* fretted in a cover story, *BOYS WILL BE BOYS*. The *New York Times* invoked the same bugaboo in *HOW BOYS LOST OUT TO GIRL POWER*. The problem, the article concluded, may well be that "the wrong sex is getting all the attention in school." The media found plenty of "expert" witnesses to support this view among the bumper crop of books published on the bad-boy crisis in the late nineties. By provoking mothers to denigrate their sons, feminist attitudes can "create boys that are either murderous or suicidal," maintained Don and Jeanne Elium, coauthors of the popular *Raising a Son*.⁷⁰

The Eliums were right in one regard, anyway—the problem of *what boys were doing to the world* was rooted in *what the world was doing to boys*. I realized this myself as I dutifully followed the restless searchlight of the nineties media casting its powerful beams on one male trouble spot after another. The men were always young, their troubles always with girls, drugs, or guns. The location was, more often than not, southern California. I attended a weekly "gang prevention" class at Millikan High School in Long Beach, about twenty miles south of Los Angeles, where kids sat in a portable unit (what passed for a classroom facility in the financially strapped public-school system) and watched videos about the baneful influence of graffiti artists and street cliques. I rode with the trancy police as they chased down young male fugitives from the barbed-wire locked compounds of Los Angeles public schools, pseudo-cops who liked to impress me with Polaroids they carried of scowling adolescent thugs, their versions of the Nation's Most Wanted posters. (One such wannabe G-man carried his snapshots in a family-style photo

album.) I sat in on a Los Angeles County "Youth Summit," held in the banquet room of a woefully underfunded community hospital, where a panel of impoverished male adolescents—and no adults—discussed how to combat the threat that the older society said they posed.

As elsewhere, boy trouble was just the surface manifestation of boys in trouble. That trouble wasn't simply indulgent or neglectful parents or haridan feminists, but a culture that had the boys *and* their elders by the throat. The injuries borne by successive generations looked different, but they were inflicted by the same trauma.

The common burden of fathers and sons struck me as I found myself in the fall of 1993 at what any newspaper would have called ground zero of the American masculinity crisis: in a town a few miles east of Long Beach called Lakewood, seated in a molded plastic chair at a chain restaurant, chilled air and Muzak flowing through the vents, talking to Billy Shehan, the sex-"points" champ of the nationally notorious bad-boy pack called the Spur Posse. A half year past his media fame, Billy was trying to figure out where his young life had taken such an unsavory turn, and he was beginning to make a connection that had eluded his many journalist interviewers. They largely wrote off the Spurs as arrogant high-school athletes who had let all the glory go to their heads. But Billy Shehan suspected that sports was just the most visible sign of a deeper problem, one that had less to do with high-school trophies and more to do with history. "The parks are here because of [the aerospace corporation] McDonnell Douglas," he said to me. "Pop Warner's here because of Douglas. So we have to be products of our society somehow, don't we?"

So they do, and so do their fathers, and all the men who have been buffered by the collapse of that society's promise. This is the story of a feminist's travels through a postwar male realm, a journey that began in Los Angeles but led through an America decided by the fathers, inhabited by the sons, but belonging in the end to neither. It is also a reflection of my own mental journey as I struggled to understand the perilous voyage to manhood undertaken by the men I once knew as boys—boys who were shown a satellite, and understood in its transit that the world would soon be theirs.