
WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH

BY GABRIEL WINANT

In the world of politics, masculinity has gone rabid. Machista strongmen flex their muscles on a world stage that increasingly resembles L.A.'s Muscle Beach. While Putin consolidates power in the name of order, Ahmadinejad rattles his scimitar at the corrupt West, Nigerian men threaten to stone to death Nigerian women, Orthodox Jews are infuriated over a gay pride march in Jerusalem and American states can't preserve the nuclear family fast enough. Everyone is suddenly spoiling for a fight.

Americans think they know what makes a man. The ideal male is actually a pretty recognizable character, and he's a lot like Johnny Cash. He's patriotic, unpretentious and blunt, tough and unafraid to fight, and strong-headed and self-reliant. If wronged, he'll exact revenge; if he commits a misdeed, he will be redeemed. There is another American man who shares these characteristics with the country singer—or at least wants us to think that he does.

Consider George W. Bush in the rubble of the World Trade Center, bullhorn in hand, warning that the world would hear from America. At our most vulnerable, we turned to this incarnation of American manhood, incubated on the ranch in Texas, to land on an aircraft carrier to reassure us that the foe is awed into submission, and that we are safe. Bush pulled off this butch stunt to accolades of his virility from the pundit class. Chris Matthews of "Hardball" heaped praise on the size of the bulge in his pants—his "manly characteristic," as talk-radio host G. Gordon Liddy described it. Columnist Peggy Noonan proclaimed Bush the resurrected John Wayne. Meanwhile, *People Magazine* anointed septuagenarian Donald Rumsfeld one of its sexiest men of the year. And all of this seems somehow vaguely unsurprising; our leaders are supposed to be warriors and cowboys.

There is a distinctly American mythology of the up-by-the-bootstraps hero and the brave cowboy taming new

worlds. In our mental geography, it seems a Western tale, springing from somewhere around Texas. While there are different versions of this story with different characters—the vengeful and righteous white-hat cowboy, the young man gone west on Horatio Alger's advice, who makes his own way and grows up with the country—they are all masculine, even macho. The gendered nature lends this narrative tremendous rhetorical power in the face of threats to American security. Modern candidates for president—chiefly Republicans—have largely succeeded in playing to these gender-based caricatures; they are more decisive, rough-and-tumble, and virile. They have portrayed their opponents as unwilling or unable to deal with American foes because they are too much brain and too little brawn, because they are hand-wringing, and generally effeminate. National campaigns, fought on television, transform into Western movies; the presidential aspirant who knows best how to ward off the Indians gets the keys to the White House.

The birth of the modern conservative movement, appropriately enough, can be traced to the cowboy country of the American Southwest with the 1964 presidential campaign of Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater. Goldwater retired from the Air Force as a Major General; in the Senate and as a presidential candidate he was a voice shouting in the desert for a confrontational conservatism, against the New Deal and for using nuclear weapons against Vietnam. His cowboy code contrasted very neatly with the perceived communist military threat. Goldwater's acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention (RNC) in San Francisco was a call to arms against communism, and it shows early telltale signs of individualist machismo: "This nation, whose creative people have enhanced this entire span of history, should again thrive upon the greatness of all those things which we—we as individual citizens—can and should do." Goldwater painted a picture of

the polity as a macrocosm of the stateless old West, in which those who succeed are those who get by on their own.

The masculine, individualist ethos translated clearly for Goldwater into a readiness to project military power with a steady hand. He praised the Eisenhower administration for its forceful custody of national security: "And I needn't remind you that it was the strength and the believable will of the Eisenhower years that kept the peace by using our strength, by using it in the Formosa Strait, and in Lebanon, and by showing it courageously at all times." Goldwater eagerly contrasted these decisive actions with what he saw as a cowardly Kennedy-Johnson administration: "During four futile years the Administration which we shall replace has distorted and lost that faith. It has talked and talked and talked and talked the words of freedom but it has failed and failed and failed in the works of freedom. "How recognizably macho this insult is—that an inadequate opponent is all hat and no cattle. Early attempts to redefine military competence as synonymous with Sun Belt swagger—"believable will"—were underway.

American politics pivoted during the 1960s and 1970s; the Republican Party began building a majority, its ranks swollen by millions of former Democrats who had watched their traditional political home become the party of "acid, amnesty, and abortion." Nixon's two successful campaigns for the presidency in 1968 and 1972 capitalized on a Democratic Party unsure of its own position. The Republicans portrayed themselves as the appropriately masculine steady hand to conduct the Vietnam War and wage the Cold War. Nixon studiously communicated in his 1968 acceptance speech just how much his life was a story of a plucky American man:

I see another child tonight. He hears the train go by at night and he dreams of far away places where he'd like to go. It seems like an impossible dream. But he is helped on his journey through life. A father who had to go to work before he finished the sixth grade, sacrificed everything he had so that his sons could go to college. A gentle, Quaker mother, with a passionate concern for peace, quietly wept when he went to war but she

understood why he had to go. A great teacher, a remarkable football coach, an inspirational minister encouraged him on his way. A courageous wife and loyal children stood by him in victory and also defeat . . . And tonight he stands before you—nominated for President of the United States of America.

Nixon eagerly conveyed (in sentence fragments; complete sentences seem to be a mark of softness) that he had lived a life in which the people around him were all-American archetypes, filling their traditional gender roles. His father worked hard, his mother was “gentle” and “wept,” his football coach and minister were influential, his wife was loyal, and he had risen on pure Western grit to the top, where he swore, “We will never stain the honor of the United States of America.” This kind of macho belligerence, evocative of the Marine Corps hymn, “First to fight for right and freedom / And to keep our honor clean,” was particularly effective in the face of a Democratic Party shredding itself over the Vietnam War.

The Democratic nominees of 1968 and 1972—Hubert Humphrey and George McGovern—led a fractious party that did not seem tough enough to run itself, much less a war. In 1968, as Humphrey was

handed the nomination, the party imploded on national television as thousands of anti-war protesters flooded its convention in Chicago. The police met them with a shockingly brutal response, later described as a “police riot.” As the police rained down blows, the protesters shouted, “The whole world is watching! The whole world is watching!” It turned out that America was watching, but it was rooting for Chicago’s blue-collar police force against the hippies, with their unshaven women and long-haired men. The tear gas left Humphrey weeping in his hotel room that overlooked the protest. Onstage at the convention, liberal Connecticut Senator Abraham Ribicoff accused Chicago Mayor Daley of “Gestapo tactics”; on tape, Richard Daley can be seen shouting, “Fucking kike,” upward at Ribicoff’s podium. The party emerged from the convention devastated by the fight over its identity; Humphrey hobbled out of Chicago the pyrrhic victor.

Left and right alike loathed Humphrey as the spineless creature of Lyndon Johnson, given the nomination without fairly competing for it. Under pressure from Johnson, Humphrey had avoided a compromise with the anti-war elements of the Democratic Party, and by large margins, respondents in Gallup polls indicated that they did not believe he would change from Johnson’s now unpopular

strategy in Vietnam. Perceived as a hostage to the man who made him Vice President, Humphrey was hardly the stuff of Western heroism.

McGovern did not have it any easier. In fact, McGovern was more explicitly antiwar than Humphrey had been; if Humphrey was seen as the creature of Lyndon Johnson, McGovern was seen as that of the hippie Left, whose members did not abide by traditional gender roles and opposed military intervention.

Cognitive linguist George Lakoff asserts that, at least when it comes to politics, we think in metaphors that arise from our understanding of the family:

What links strict-father family-based morality to politics is a common metaphor shared by conservatives and liberals alike—the Nation-as-Family metaphor, in which the nation is seen as a family, the government as a parent, and the citizens as children. This metaphor turns family-based morality into political morality.

If we accept this analysis, then the famous refrain of McGovern’s acceptance speech—“Come home, America”—sounds incredibly maternal. He seems to have done Nixon’s work for him by choosing this particular rhetorical backdrop, rather than claiming the battle-front as his stage. Where Nixon had spoken of protecting national honor, McGovern spoke of healing national wounds. Rather than bursting with pride and courage like Nixon’s, McGovern’s “heart has ached for the past ten years over the agony of Vietnam.” The Democrats emerged from the Nixon era humiliated by the landslide defeat of their nominee, who’d been caricatured as the candidate of surrender in Vietnam, leading his army of indeterminately-gendered supporters; the Richard Daleys of the country were now Republicans.

Shift to 1980: Jimmy Carter ran for re-election amidst two crises—one in Iran, one in the American economy—that exposed his inability to control events. The conditions were perfect for Ronald Reagan, a man intimately familiar with American male archetypes from his career in show business. His filmography includes dozens of roles as cowpokes, football coaches, and



soldiers in titles like “Death Valley Days,” “The Lawless Have Laws,” and “No Gun Behind His Badge.” The dominant trope of Reagan’s campaign was opposition to what he saw as the intrusive nature of the federal government, a variation on old Western distrust of the power of the state.

The old West came to Washington with Ronald Reagan, who rode into town to save the day from an impotent administration, warning the nation, “The administration which has brought us to this state is seeking your endorsement for four more years of weakness, indecision, mediocrity and incompetence.” Carter’s inadequate mettle yielded military shame, according to Reagan: “We are given weakness when we need strength; vacillation when the times demand firmness.” The elements of the gendered critique are here so clear that one is tempted to wonder what Freud would have made of Reagan’s language; the opposition lacks “resolve,” shows “weakness,” and “vacillates” when “times demand firmness.”

The difference between Reagan and Goldwater, of course, is that Reagan won in a landslide. The important distinction seems to be that while Goldwater was all cowboy tough talk, Reagan also employed the kind of sunny can-do Western rhetoric that seemed to echo the Nixon campaign. Take, for example, his 1984 acceptance speech: “America is coming back and is more confident than ever about the future.” Reagan had a consistent scrappiness, sunnier than Goldwater’s dark fury; he was both confrontational and optimistic at once.

During the 1980s, a large gender gap in voting patterns emerged that is still present today. Men followed Reagan to the new countrified Republican Party. Polls show that men are more likely to be supportive of the use of violence, and opposed to communal—that is, non-individualist—measures: for example, 45% of men and 30% of women believe that the government should provide fewer services, 61% of men and 37% of women support allowing bombers to strike populated areas, and 28% of men but a full 48% of women support a ban on handguns. Once the gendered rhetoric became more sophisticated and complete, as it was in Reagan’s campaigns, this difference in

opinion was tapped into more deeply; the gender gap materialized.

Reagan’s successor, George H.W. Bush, more or less attempted to reproduce Reagan’s rhetorical strategy in his 1988 RNC speech. Bush established both his plainspoken cowboy and self-made man credentials in the same story:

We moved to west Texas 40 years ago. The war was over, and we wanted to get out and make it on our own. Those were exciting days. Lived in a little shotgun house, one room for the three of us. Worked in the oil business, started my own. In time we had six children. Moved from the shotgun to a duplex apartment to a house. Lived the dream—high school football on Friday night, Little League, neighborhood barbecue.

Bush projects an image as a forthright Westerner who has no truck with fancy language or personal pronouns. He said as much moments later: “I may not be the most eloquent, but I learned early that eloquence won’t draw oil from the ground.” Bush, of course, was not a roughneck from the oil fields, but the Yale-educated millionaire son of a U. S. senator.

In the tradition of his ideological predecessors, Bush’s projection of masculinity extended to foreign policy. Once again, indecision and weakness seemed to plague those who, rather than being plainspoken or Western, seemed to represent the views of the over-sophisticated Eastern elite: “Strength and clarity lead to peace—weakness and ambivalence lead to war. Weakness and ambivalence lead to war. Weakness tempts aggressors. Strength stops them. I will not allow this country to be made weak again.” And like Reagan and Nixon, George H.W. Bush did not face an opponent who was particularly conscious of the gender image he put forward.

Michael Dukakis, the Democratic nominee in 1988, was a Republican’s dream come true; he steadfastly refused to engage in bluster or braggadocio. Dukakis declared in his convention speech, “This election isn’t about ideology. It’s about competence.” He was, inadvertently but painstakingly, laying the foundation for the eventual attack on him as a soulless

technocrat, unwilling to fight for anything. In the second presidential debate, journalist Bernard Shaw asked Dukakis, “Governor, if Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?” Dukakis’ infamous response was painfully cold and clinical: “I don’t see any evidence that it’s a deterrent, and I think there are better and more effective ways to deal with violent crime.” With no mention of the hypothetical rape and murder of his wife, Dukakis then moved on to discuss a “hemispheric summit” on the drug war. Dukakis appeared unable to be the nation’s protective father-figure, defending what is dear, and punishing those who threaten it.

To make up for the masculinity gap, Dukakis infamously rode around in an M-1 tank, apparently hoping to perform a kind of reverse-engineering of the Republican strategy; if he could not seem macho enough to appear interested in national security, perhaps he could seem interested enough in national security to appear macho. He ended up looking so awkward that the Bush campaign used the image in its own attack ad. It was what political scientists call an “uncertainty ad”—it devastatingly suggested that Dukakis did not have a steady enough hand to lead America militarily, as evinced by how ridiculous he looked in military getup.

Having triumphed over the champion of the tame Eastern boutique, George H. W. Bush found himself presiding over an event that would damage his own party’s electoral strength: the end of the Cold War. With national security temporarily removed from the political discourse (hence Clinton campaign manager James Carville’s mantra “It’s the economy, stupid!”), Democrats—or at least Clinton—found themselves able to win elections while ignoring the machismo contest.

George W. Bush brought back the old macho rhetoric in 2000, by showing up on his ranch whenever possible, flamboyantly clearing brush and using hay and guns as props. Like Reagan and his father, he grasped for the entire Western macho myth: he is a self-made cowboy who operates his own ranch—a true individualist. Fortunately for Bush, Clinton himself had already recast his party in a way that made

it vulnerable to Bush's attack from the West.

That Bush was able to win an election in which his opponent was believed to have every advantage speaks to the profound power of cultural difference in American politics. The combination of Clinton's constant, pandering reach for the political center and the Lewinsky scandal had cast a pall over the Democratic Party. Democrats seemed too slick, too refined and ready to parse the meaning of the most basic language (most infamously, Clinton's "That depends on what your definition of 'is' is"). This was the party that represented those qualities most resented about the university, the cosmopolitan, the essentially blue-state: disrespect for sexual and gender tradition, overintellectuality, and artificiality. Bush was able to portray Gore—notorious not as a suave dissembler, but as an insufferably boring straight arrow—as dishonestly grandiloquent and thus a cultural alien, not an American man. The plainspoken cowboy stepped in just in time to save the country.

The September 11 attacks put national security squarely back onto the center of the national stage, and with it, the rhetoric of masculinity in politics. In the 2004 election season, the Bush campaign let blaze the guns of the culture war: red state against blue, rural against urban, Southwestern against Northeastern, plainspoken against evasive, ordinary against elite. Perhaps the governing dichotomy of the campaign, though, was that of the steady hand and the limp wrist. Bush made explicit the claims about himself that his predecessors tended to express with their life stories or merely by their style: "You know what I believe and where I stand. You may have noticed I have a few flaws, too. People sometimes have to correct my English ... Some folks look at me and see a certain swagger, which in Texas is called 'walking.' Now and then I come across as a little too blunt." The amount of confrontational language in Bush's RNC speech is extraordinary. He ends eleven paragraphs of his speech with some kind of challenge. He warns three separate times, "Nothing will hold us back." The other challenges he issues are "This will not happen on my watch," "We are not turning back," "I will never

relent in defending America—whatever it takes," "And we will prevail," "I will defend America every time," "America will not forget," "Freedom is on the march," and "Our tested and confident nation can achieve anything." This is the cocky, swaggering Bush we know so well, who challenged Iraqi insurgents to "Bring them on," and fell back on a cowboy formula when dealing with September 11: "I want justice. There's an old poster out west, as I recall, that said, 'Wanted: Dead or Alive.'" Here, the line from cowboy swagger to military competence barely needs to be drawn; for Bush, they are synonymous. His bluntness and his capacity as commander-in-chief *are the same characteristic*.

John Kerry hardly knew what hit him. Kerry had hedged his bets on the war in Iraq; he seemed to hope to be just left enough to win the Democratic nomination, while still right enough to be what he considered electable in November. It was this incoherent approach that led Kerry to utter his infamous flip-flop, for which Bush did not hesitate to excoriate him in his acceptance speech: "When asked to explain his vote, the Senator said, 'I actually did vote for the 87 billion dollars before I voted against it.' Then he said he was 'proud' of that vote. Then, when pressed, he said it was a 'complicated' matter. There is nothing complicated about supporting our troops in combat." One would be hard-pressed to find a more perfect contrast to Bush's macho black-and-white style than Kerry's insistence on shades of gray.

Vice President Dick Cheney was eager to point out in his RNC speech just how effeminate Kerry's nuance was: "Even in this post-9/11 period, Senator Kerry doesn't appear to understand how the world has changed. He talks about leading a 'more sensitive war on terror'—(laughter)—as though al Qaeda will be impressed with our softer side." This baldly gendered attack is in keeping with some of the worst tendencies of the Bush campaign, whose operatives coordinated their campaign with the drive to ban gay marriage and preserve the "traditional family," and nicknamed Democratic candidate John Edwards "the Breck girl," after a famous shampoo spokeswoman. The message resonates at an almost subconscious level: the candidate

who cares too much about his hair is not man enough to care enough about killing the enemy. Bush rode to triumph in an election in which the electorate was wracked by anxiety—particularly, though not exclusively, about terrorism—that provided an ideal backdrop for a resolute Westerner and brought out the contrast between him and the effeminacies his campaign was eager to point out.

Bush's swagger and strut are the most recent manifestations of a strategy ever more present in our politics. As the decades since Goldwater have passed, Republican nominees—all but one from the Sun Belt—have relied increasingly on Western individualist bravado. One might have expected that, like other strategies of rhetorical symbolism used in presidential politics—racial appeals, for example—the kind of language used to communicate the masculinity of these candidates would have grown more subtle and refined with time. Instead, the reverse has happened; while Goldwater merely talked like a cowboy, Bush now feels comfortable referring explicitly and frequently to the old West.

Perhaps this vanishing Republican subtlety is a function of increased uncertainty in general; the world of 2004 is fraught with an array of new and potentially frightening ideological, cultural, political, and economic forces that were not present in 1964. While cowboy rhetoric obviously cannot explain every political development, a certain late twentieth-century erosion of barriers—literal barriers as well as the figurative ones of gender, race, class, and countless others—may have left us hungry for a more authoritarian, macho brand of leadership. One worries that modernity itself is provoking male fury, that threatened masculinity and reactionary politics go together. Thousands of years of male hegemony are suddenly being pushed back, piece by piece. Perhaps all of manhood now finds itself assaulted by a different-seeming world. Cultures rise in arms as offensive images and ideas flood in, or jobs pour out, and men the world over begin to feel newly and strangely powerless. This may be the same uncertainty—a crisis of masculinity, even—that has helped to create the strong-man politics perfectly embodied by George W. Bush. *L*