ALL IN THE FAMILY: MODERN U.S. PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS, GENDER PERFORMANCE, AND COMPENSATORY HETEROSEXUALITY

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By

Aidan Smith

Dissertation Committee:
Mari Yoshihara, Chairperson
Vernadette Gonzales
Robert Perkinson
David Stannard
Kathy Ferguson

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DEDICATION

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Abstract

In the United States, an investment in patriarchal leadership has changed little over the course of the past five decades, in spite of the strides made by the second and third wave feminist movements. In an effort to make their personal narratives intelligible to the electorate, a presidential candidate’s easily identified position in the nuclear family is essential, and variations are considered a liability. Importantly, these candidates have vigorously worked to demonstrate “compensatory heterosexuality,” an unquestionable normative identity that seeks to overcome other challenges to their masculinity. This study focuses on the following elections because of the singularity of the candidate (representing the “first” individual to represent his race or religion) or because of their occurrence during a perceived “crisis of masculinity”: the races of the 1950s between Adlai Stevenson and Dwight Eisenhower; the 1960 contest between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon; the elections of the 1980s, between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter, and Reagan vs. Walter Mondale; and finally Barack Obama and John McCain’s 2008 contest, and the 2012 election between Obama and Mitt Romney. The study also considers the effects that an investment in patriarchal authority and appropriate masculine gender performance has on women candidates for the presidency; their campaigns have navigated around possible pitfalls of motherhood and domesticity by claiming expertise on domestic and international issues as a direct result of their experiences as mothers and wives. The phenomenon of compensatory heterosexuality is not restricted to conservative candidates, as progressive politics have frequently been furthered by leveraging the tropes of motherhood and fatherhood. This analysis places gender at the center of consideration of presidential campaign communications, revealing that efforts to establish appropriate gender performance have real and lasting impacts on public policy.
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Chapter 1. Introduction

In the United States, the traditional discourse of appropriate masculine political leadership and feminine political subjectivity has changed little over the course of the past five decades, in spite of the strides made by the second and third wave feminist movements. In no arena is this clearer than in the realm of presidential campaign politics. Men are positioned as military or corporate leaders, with their wives and children at the ready to demonstrate their satisfactory performance as a patriarchal figure. Those women who have attempted to occupy the Oval Office, until recently excluded from the ability to claim wartime experiences and other positions of power, have claimed legitimacy and political knowledge through their experiences as mothers and wives. For both men and women, in an effort to make themselves and their personal narratives intelligible to the electorate, a candidate’s easily identified position in the nuclear family is essential, and variations from common gender roles on the part of the candidate or his or her spouse are considered a liability. Above all, adherence to the heteronormative paradigm of gender performance and sexuality are required.

As a result, representations of these men and women, particularly those created by the campaigns themselves, typically emphasize the individual’s role as a father or mother, with textual and visual representations placing the candidate squarely in the center of a nuclear family. Modern campaigns have focused on television as the best conduit to make their pitch for their candidate: ubiquitous, immediate, and intimately located in the domestic sphere, television communications, and advertisements in particular, reach into the household to make arguments about which candidate will best meet the needs of not
only the singular citizen, but the family as a whole. Campaign commercials often do the majority of the rhetorical work to situate the candidate as an average citizen, including visual representations not only of his immediate family, but also depictions of his family of origin. Across the decades, any regular viewer can easily recall a presidential campaign advertisement that features images of the candidate’s family; little has changed in the transition over the decades between the images of a smiling Caroline Kennedy, Chelsea Clinton, or Malia Obama.

If this trend of inclusion of a candidate’s family has been ongoing and widely accepted as a standard inclusion in a candidate’s biography, why is it significant for scholarly analysis? I would argue that the inclusion of a candidate’s nuclear family in campaign communications not only articulates that individual’s normative gender performance, but also reiterates a historic investment in patriarchal rule. Though this nation claims to have eschewed inherited class and race privilege, little has been done to establish a claim that gender privilege has been abolished, particularly in a consideration of the presidency, an office which has been historically and recently constructed as a specifically gendered occupation, to be occupied solely by those who can meet the rigorous national demands for demonstrable masculine identity. Succinctly articulated by Horowitz and Swyers, “American history is still told as a story of “founding fathers,”” and the idea of a patriarch as president has a firm hold in the American imagination. The result is that the notion of what a president should look like, of what is presidential, is fundamentally masculine.”¹ Of course, the notion of patriarchal political leadership is nothing new. Families passed on wealth, power and political leadership from father to son for thousands of years. Sir Robert Filmer’s definitive treatise on patriarchy,
Patriarcha (1680), argues that monarchial power was essentially patriarchal or paternal in character, and was hence natural or God-given. He attempted to show that God had given to Adam authority over his children, which was not simply the authority of the father, but derivatively, the authority of a king. Filmer’s argument rests on the premise that not only Adam, but that all succeeding patriarchs had right of fatherhood, royal authority over their children. Filmer’s theory of patriarchy says that the right to rule comes from God, lineage, and fatherhood. Male governmental rule is reasonable, natural, and God-given.

Given this understanding, if there is an easily identifiable and unquestioned trend of demanding placement of the potential president within the rubric of a “normal” nuclear family, it is important to determine how this placement within the national imagination is so vital to a successful presidential campaign. Modern opinion polls as far back as 1954 have insisted upon an exhibition of familial leadership as a requirement for a candidate. Troy’s survey of the changing role of the presidential candidates includes an October 1956 Time Magazine man-on-the-street critique of Adlai Stevenson’s marital status as the first divorced candidate, “If a man can’t run his family he has no business trying to run the country.” Fifty years later, a CBS News poll conducted in June 2007 found that six in ten voters consider a presidential candidate’s spouse as “very” or “somewhat” important factor in their choice, and that they would factor the presidential spouse into their vote.

This natural, normative masculine gender performance is vital to a successful presidential campaign because the office of president of the United States is intrinsically gendered itself. Political scientist Sally J. Kenney argues that it is not simply the personal
gender performances of those who hold office, but the institutions of government themselves that enact a gendered ideology:

Political institutions produce, reproduce and subvert gender… Each political institution has a distinctively gendered culture that interacts with larger issues of gender being negotiated and renegotiated in the larger society… To say that an institution is gendered, then, is to recognize that constructions of masculinity and femininity are intertwined in the daily culture of an institution rather than existing out in society or fixed within individuals which they then bring whole to the institution.²

I argue that the presidency is the most gendered institution in the American political system, holding the power to direct the forces of war as Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. This ultimate symbol of masculine power symbolically supersedes the presidential authority to appoint judges or veto legislation, other responsibilities held by the President. Further, the Office of the Presidency is gendered because it is the only powerful position in the tripartite system that has not only has never been held by a woman, but has never had a woman as a viable candidate for election. Women have served with distinction at all levels in the executive and judicial branch, yet the executive branch has remained elusive. As Kenney claims, the constructions of masculinity are entwined in the daily culture of the presidency, regardless of the individual holding the office on any given day.

Yet while the presidency has always been gendered, the discourse surrounding these constructions of masculinity has changed over time. Sociologist Michael Kimmel’s seminal work, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, charts the changes in the meaning of both manhood and masculinity across time, and writes, “Manhood is neither static nor timeless. Manhood in not the manifestation of an inner essence; it’s socially

constructed... We tend to search for the eternal during moments of crisis, those points of transition when the old definitions no longer work.”

Even the vocabulary used to discuss men’s gender behavior has changed over time. Gail Bederman tracks this development, citing the transition between “manliness” and “masculinity” in the late 1800s, with the former having a moral dimension: “Manliness, in short, was precisely the sort of middle-class Victorian cultural formulation which grew shaky in the late nineteenth century. Thereafter, when men wished to invoke a different sort of male power, they would increasingly use the words “masculine” and “masculinity.”

RW Connell’s definitive work, *Masculinities*, offers a simple working definition for the modern era: “masculinity is what men ought to be.” She notes that media studies often deploy this normative definition of masculinity: individuals find models presented to them in the media or larger culture that provide an example of how to be a man in the world. In order to establish their candidate as the best man for the job, the most natural fit for a position that has the perception of being the most powerful in the world.

Yet what is this demonstrable masculine identity? In what anthropologist David Gilmore has called “the manhood puzzle,” individuals across cultures do not simply mature into the state of manhood and its privileges, they must earn it. “Culture constructs an appropriate manhood—the presentation or “imaging of the male role. In particular, there is a constantly recurring notion that real manhood is different from simple anatomical maleness, that it is not a natural condition that comes about spontaneously through biological maturation but rather is a precarious or artificial state that boys must

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4 Bederman, 18
In the twentieth century United States, proof that one has met these challenges can be gained on the battlefield or in the bedroom, and presidential campaigns have historically labored to present this proof of manhood to the electorate.

If manhood is something that is earned, then masculinity is the demonstrable quality of being a man, the regular evidencing of one’s normative gender identity, the active claim on an earned manhood. As cultural theorist Judith Butler has argued, one’s gender is demonstrated through personal performances, “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.” Gender performances deemed to be outside of the paradigmatic regulatory frame run the real risk of being perceived as what Butler calls “abject identities,” individuals unacceptable and unintelligible to their culture, and certainly unelectable. Candidates seeking the highest office in the land function with this regulatory frame as does the average individual, and I argue that this performance is critiqued on a larger public scale through a contest between men that literally labels the contestants as a winner or a loser. Thus, campaign communications must clearly establish their candidate as entrenched within an appropriate gender identity, and importantly, must make this performance seem *natural*, not contrived or aggrandized, a mere component of his character and biography. A review of historical presidential gender performance provides a useful starting point for this study on the role of demonstrable masculinity in modern campaign communications.

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Historical Overview: Gender and the Presidency

This study builds on the works of historians, sociologists and other scholars that have explored not only the social construction of masculinity, but the multiple ways that adherence to its ideals have shaped the office of the presidency as well as foreign and domestic policy. At the creation of the presidency, would-be leaders were situated as patriarchs. As Mark Kann notes in his survey of gender politics and the early republic, the Revolution helped challenge some patriarchal order, but not the notion of the natural status of patriarchal rule: “Patriots depicted George Washington as a national father figure who rightfully asserted political prerogative to establish independence and a republican government; but they pictured King George as a deceitful despot who wrongfully wielded political prerogative only to destroy American men’s natural rights and contractual rights as well as to ignore their legitimate protests.”

This juxtaposition between the two does not challenge the inherent ideology that a father figure was needed to lead the nation. As the nation expanded, this belief in the primacy of American patriarchy was used to justify the genocide of indigenous peoples, as Michael Rogin’s profile of Andrew Jackson’s use of patriarchal authority in his efforts to dispossess tribes of their land. Many scholars have explored the role of patriarchal rule in the maintenance of the chattel slave system, as well as the imperial pursuits of the late 1800s as evidenced in the doctrine of manifest destiny.

The pursuit of, and insistence on, patriarchal authority had been so naturalized by the time mass media became a ubiquitous

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presence in the lives of average citizens at the dawn of the 20th century, only the most robust gender performance of masculinity could fill the role of symbolic patriarch.

Perhaps no president embodied the masculine ideal as much as Theodore Roosevelt. A military man, father of six, and vocal proponent of what he termed in an 1899 speech “The Strenuous Life,” Roosevelt had no problem articulating the ways that appropriately ordered gender behavior impacted the health of the nation:

In the last analysis a healthy state can exist only when the men and women who make it up lead clean, vigorous, healthy lives; when the children are so trained that they shall endeavor, not to shirk difficulties, but to overcome them; not to seek ease, but to know how to wrest triumph from toil and risk. The man must be glad to do a man's work, to dare and endure and to labor; to keep himself, and to keep those dependent upon him. The woman must be the housewife, the helpmeet of the homemaker, the wise and fearless mother of many healthy children... When men fear work or fear righteous war, when women fear motherhood, they tremble on the brink of doom; and well it is that they should vanish from the earth, where they are fit subjects for the scorn of all men and women who are themselves strong and brave and high-minded.11

Roosevelt spoke these words as the sitting Governor of New York; within a few years he would become the Vice President of the United States, assuming the presidency in late 1901 upon the assassination of William McKinley. Roosevelt’s vision of the “healthy state” was one that was particularly gendered, but also restricted by race. His writings reveal a fear of white decline, and urged whites to have many children to stave off the threat of “race suicide.” As Gail Bederman so artfully demonstrates in her landmark book, Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States 1880-1917, Roosevelt used a rhetoric of civilization to enforce white supremacy,

and male power and white supremacy went hand in hand. While the conflation of these two ideas was nothing new, as noted with Andrew Jackson’s positioning himself as the “white father” of Native Americans, Bederman argues that Roosevelt, with his prowess as a hunter and rancher coupled with his identity as a Harvard-educated elite from New York City, occupied a liminal space between the two possible categories for a man to occupy, the savage and the refined. “His vibrant virility was Roosevelt’s talent for embodying two contradictory models of manhood simultaneously—civilized manliness and primitive masculinity. Combing manliness and masculinity…Roosevelt claimed not only a personal power for himself but also a collective imperialistic manhood for the white American race.”

Roosevelt brought his investment in the strenuous life as a mechanism to prove one’s manhood to the presidency. The former Rough Rider in the Spanish American War and rancher in the Badlands of South Dakota was almost a perfect composite of all the things a man should be. As argued most effectively by Bederman, Kristin Hoganson and Sarah Watts, Roosevelt’s influence on the nation at this pivotal time as it struggled with its national identity laid the groundwork for a modern investment in demonstrable masculinity and heteronormativity. As Watts remarked, “Roosevelt’s desire for toughening the nation’s body against degeneration, his flight from effeminacy his need to inflict pain on himself and others, and his rational use of men’s capacity for “primitive” violence combined to cultivate an emotionally shared, exclusionary national community of white, heterosexual males.”

By the mid-twentieth century, masculinity was no less relevant in a construction of the presidency or public policy. Campaigns’ representations of their candidates can also be seen to align with the role the nation took in international affairs following the end of World War II. Robert D. Dean’s *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender And The Making Of Cold War Foreign Policy* explores the role of gender politics in the presidencies of both John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. He argues that while the U.S. was a filial protector of the oppressed and downtrodden, it was also a stern disciplinarian of those nations that would not adhere to what was considered to be appropriate behavior. The introduction of television allowed candidates to shape themselves to fit these ideals within a neat, thirty-second package. This study examines the ways that images of masculine physical strength and virility emerge through textual and visual cues in televised campaign advertisements, and while the performance of these emblematic masculine roles has changed over time, the roles themselves are relatively standard.

“Ways a Man Ought to Be”: Symbols of Masculinity in Presidential Campaigns

Though the vocabulary to talk about men’s gender behavior has changed over time, most presidential campaigns have deployed a few well-worn tropes of ideal manhood that have held fast since the birth of the republic. Much of this study focuses on how candidates navigate defining their manhood during these times of crisis, and often they resort to familiar formulations of this Gilmore’s “earned manhood.” Candidates have regularly used the following three tropes, sometimes overlapping, to demonstrate how they fulfill the manhood requirement:
**Warrior Hero**—George Washington, Ulysses S. Grant and Dwight Eisenhower converted battlefield leadership into political power, each one a general that commanded successful wartime campaigns. It is not difficult to translate strategic military prowess into an argument for why one should be given the position of Commander-In-Chief. But strategic military leadership itself is not required to deploy this trope in an election campaign. Those among the lower ranks, from John F. Kennedy and Jimmy Carter to John McCain and John Kerrey have included their military service as part of their communications package, even when their military adventures were less than successful.

**Self-Made Man**— The role of the rugged frontiersman has played a large part in presidential campaigns, from Andrew Jackson’s reputation as “Old Hickory” to tales of Theodore Roosevelt’s exploits in the South Dakota Badlands. From humble beginnings the self-made man rose to prominence through a combination of intelligence, strength and hard work. His campaign promises often compare the challenges of life to the obstacles that would be faced leading the nation. Modern incarnations range from Richard Nixon to Ronald Reagan to Bill Clinton to Barack Obama.

**Beneficent Patriarch**—Springing from the base of the “founding father” ideology, the beneficent patriarch operates from a place of paternal judgment and love of country. Frequently, candidates evoke this character by surrounding themselves with their own children and grandchildren, and by arguing for their policies from the position of lived experiences as fathers and husbands. Though most candidates fall into this category at some point in their campaigns, others have made more use of the trope, including Lyndon Johnson, Gerald Ford, and Mitt Romney.
Oftentimes, campaign communications involve all of these tropes, and many candidates could easily fit within any or all of these categories. Importantly, while candidates try to position themselves within these easily recognized formulations of manhood and masculinity, their campaign communications also try to demonstrate how their opponent falls outside of these frameworks. Attack ads that emphasize an opponents’ lack of military service, or focus on his inherited affluence may weaken their adversary’s chances, but do little to disturb the relevance of these tropes themselves. These emblematic classifications of manhood exclude those whose personal narratives do not conform, marginalizing large swaths of would-be contenders for the presidency.

**Compensatory Heterosexuality: An Unassailable Route to the Oval Office**

Operating under the premise that the office of the presidency is itself gendered, both requiring and producing a normative masculinity, it is important to engage Adrienne Rich’s theory of compulsory heterosexuality in this discussion. Though she is not directly speaking of electoral politics in her landmark essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” she argued that “heterosexuality…needs to be recognized and studied as a political institution,” a framework that erases the possibility for the development of other sexual practices, as well as creates a justification for the stigmatization of those outside the structures of heterosexual identity.\(^\text{14}\) I would like to extend Rich’s theory to argue that presidential candidates have vigorously worked to demonstrate a “compensatory heterosexuality,” an unquestionable normative sexuality that seeks to overcome other challenges to their masculinity, and by extension, their

claims on the executive office. Repeated references and representation of a candidate’s wife and children provide living evidence that he is not only a participant in the compulsory heterosexuality that is culturally required, but that he is an exemplary model of it. Within the political discourse of the twentieth century, it seems his successes in this personal and domestic space can triumph over other critiques of his worthiness for the office, particularly in regards to qualities of otherness like religion and race. A candidate’s clearly articulated heterosexual identity, with its trappings of wife and children, can compensate for other perceived personal liabilities, and avoid accusations of Butler’s “abject identity.” Images of wives and children are clearly used to establish the candidates as solidly within the heterosexual identity so necessary to political success. Creation and maintenance of the nuclear family are presented as part of a resume that speaks to a candidate’s potential for leadership, communicated as readily as academic or military experience.

When faced with challenges to their campaign, candidates have often fallen back on their role as husband and father to reframe the discussion, pivoting from areas of weakness to those of relative strength. Consider Richard Nixon’s 1952 “Checkers” speech; this two-minute excerpt was actually part of a thirty-minute advertisement purchased by the Republican National Committee to allow Nixon to address accusations of financial impropriety in fundraising. Though the majority of the broadcast is a mundane accounting of Nixon’s household expenditures and assets, it is the language defending the gift of a cocker spaniel to Nixon’s daughters that is anchored in American memory. The close-up shot of Nixon’s face fills the screen, with his voice steadfast as he told the camera, “Our little girl Tricia, the six year old, named it "Checkers." And you
know, the kids, like all kids, love the dog, and I just want to say this, right now, that regardless of what they say about it, we're gonna keep it.” Nixon’s successfully pivoted the conversation away from his finances by positioning himself as a not just a candidate, but as a defender of his family. The Checkers speech is widely considered to have saved Nixon’s place on the Republican ticket as the vice-president, a precursor to his 1960 and 1968 runs. In 1960, John F. Kennedy’s campaign frequently released messages from a pregnant Jacqueline, situating her husband as a typical American husband and father instead of a multimillionaire Catholic. In 1988, George H.W. Bush launched his campaign with a commercial that featured him walking in a grassy field with six of his grandchildren, accompanied by a voice-over from his wife Barbara, “I wish people could see him as I see him. Thousands of people see him, and you know, I always loved the time someone said to George, ‘How can you run for president—you don't have any constituency!’ and George said, "Well, you know, I've got a great big family, and thousands of friends," and that's what he has!”¹⁵ A constituency is not important; his progeny will compensate for this weakness, his role as the patriarchal center of his own nuclear family coalesces with his eligibility to be a candidate for the father figure for the nation. Critics and allies both noted that in the contentious 2008 campaign, the Obama campaign allowed significantly more photos of his daughters to be released when his poll numbers were down than when he was in the lead, and their participation in the Democratic National Convention was choreographed to establish his role not only as a politician but as a caring dad.

While the mere existence of a wife and children serves to dispel possible accusations of homosexuality, it is not enough to be simply married. Throughout the

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latter half of the twentieth century, perceived failures to provide masculine protection and leadership of wives and children has resulted in failed candidacies. One notable instance includes the decline of Sen. Edmund Muskie, a would-be Democratic candidate in the 1972 election. Muskie broke into tears while responding to harsh criticisms of his wife Jane, with a New Hampshire newspaper portraying her as a bawdy alcoholic. Muskie’s campaign quickly faltered, as his response was believed to show inappropriate masculine weakness. Years later, 1988 Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis was perpetually accused of being weak on crime by the Bush campaign. After months of television commercials linking Dukakis to convicted African-American murderer Willie Horton, Dukakis was ambushed in a debate when questioned about his position on the death penalty. Moderator Bernard Shaw of CNN asked Dukakis, "Governor, if Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?"

When Dukakis reiterated his previously stated resistance to the death penalty, he was cast as a disimpassioned man that would not vigorously defend his wife’s virtue. Dukakis’ approval rating immediately plummeted following the debate, as Bush became the more masculine candidate, in spite of the fact that he himself had been labeled “wimp” on the cover of Newsweek magazine just a few months earlier. Heterosexuality can compensate for a variety of weaknesses, but it must be a rigorous heterosexuality, replete with the all the requirements of a normative masculine gender performance.

The trouble with the insistence upon candidates fitting into these categories is that those individuals whose familial relationships exist outside of the confines of heteronormativity have been necessarily excluded. Demonstrable masculinity is demanded in the campaign process, as well as the ways that acts of appropriate
masculinity are communicated. Failures to live up to these expectations diminished the candidate in that national lens, erasing other possible identities or gender performances.

**Gender and The Presidential Campaign in The Television Era**

Though the notion of appropriate masculinity and compensatory heterosexuality have been present in every presidential campaign in this nation’s history, the introduction of the television campaign advertisement arguably marks the first ubiquitous introduction of the political message into the domestic space. Instead of stump speeches in the town square or public addresses from a “whistle stop,” candidates entered the private home on the airwaves. The widespread introduction of the television into the home by mid-20th century changed perceptions of an individual’s appropriate position in the culture beyond their front door. Examining the introduction of these kinds of persuasive political communications provides fertile ground to examine the ways that the domestic, patriarchal leader maintained traction within a contemporary framework, even as other social forces worked to disrupt these traditional roles. As noted by scholars such as Elaine Tyler May and Judith Smith, following the upheaval of wartime, the post-World War II era marked a celebration of, if not insistence on, traditional gender roles. Middle class women were contained within the domestic space while their male counterparts were expected to provide economic stability and leadership to the family unit. Presidential candidates of the 1950s and 1960s leveraged television advertising and worked within this paradigm to identify themselves as the clear choice for a reproduction of this dynamic within the White House. Focus on this era allows television to stand as the primary means of broadcast communications. While the radio was still providing
news and an avenue for political communications, its relevance was subverted by the popularity of broadcast television by mid-century. Television’s reign as the primary outlet for mass communication still holds; online campaign communications became more prevalent by 2004, and had significant impact in 2008, but television advertising still reached the majority of Americans across class and racial lines. These years serve as a microcosm in which to look at the significance of television as a channel of political communications.

Several studies have performed content analysis of presidential television campaign advertisements. However, there is no comprehensive work that examines gendered representations of the candidates during the televisual era. For examples, William Benoit’s *Seeing Spots: A Functional Analysis of Presidential Television Advertisements, 1952-1996* identifies the prevalence of attack ads in presidential campaigns, and argues that these communications could mimic a candidate’s approach to confrontation, and by extension, warfare. Yet Benoit does not evoke the notion of gender in his analysis, a glaring absence in his analysis of the ways that these communications secure mindspace in the American imagination. Darrell West’s ongoing research discusses the role of television advertisements as part of an overarching campaign strategy, with an emphasis on how news media covers these communications, but spends little time on the development of a candidate’s personal narrative, much less on the role of gender performance in that narrative. Additionally, though much biographical interdisciplinary work has been done on presidential candidates, few of these sources discuss gender identity or ideology at all. So entrenched is the expectation of a normative

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masculine gender performance that any possible alternative, or even the consideration that it is a performance instead of an organic reality, is impossible.

Campaign communications have a weight that extends beyond the election, working to shape notions not only of what the most powerful person in the nation should look like and behave, but also provides a model of the intimate family relations that Americans should emulate. Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony offers us a way to understand how the media is leveraged to reiterate and normalize these traditional representations of appropriate masculinity and femininity, and an examination of presidential campaign commercials offer us a window into how political leadership is popularly conceptualized and linked to gender dynamics within the family. Raymond Williams stipulates that cultural hegemony operates much like cultural conceptions of manhood and masculinity: “It does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified.”17 Presidential campaign communications do just that, representing this idealized family structure, and the dominance of the patriarchal figure within it as another recreation and defense of the primacy of the mythical founding father of the nation, extending the naturalization of men’s leadership both in the public and private sphere. Todd Gitlin extends Williams consideration of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony in relation to television and notes that television is the “most pervasive and (in the living room sense) familiar of our cultural sites.”18 This familiarity, being both known and of the family, makes the connection between these persuasive television advertisements influential to viewers, not

only when they chose the man to vote for but when they consider how the office of the presidency operates in relation their own lives.

Televised political campaign advertisements encompass both the verbal and visual thematics of masculinity that are perceived as desirable to the campaigns and candidates themselves, as well as the electorate. Communications professionals leverage those representations of their candidates that are perceived to have the greatest resonance with their constituency, and it is not coincidental that many of these representations seek to anchor the candidate in the notion of traditional masculinity or femininity. Television spots are incredibly expensive to produce and broadcast, and typically the candidate who can purchase the most airtime wins the contest. Before these spots are aired, they undergo rigorous testing in focus groups, confirming that the sentiments expressed elicit the intended reactions from the audience. If these spots pass this rigorous pre-screening, these representations are presumably what Americans want, what resonates with the larger public, what is perceived to be natural. The previously discussed tropes of demonstrable male performance are certainly not modern inventions, yet perhaps they are most significant because they have held relatively steadfast over time. Gitlin contends that television is the channel for communicating these messages, but it “does not manufacture ideology; it relays and reproduces and processes and packages and focuses ideology that is constantly arising both from social elites and from active social groups and movements throughout the society (as well as within media organizations and practices.)”\(^{19}\) Television simply brings these messages from the cultural elite into the intimate spaces of the American home, making its messages about a candidate’s gender performance, both as a would-be head of the body politic and the head of his own

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
household, appropriately worthy of consideration within the confines of the American home.

By extension, this framework provides a lens through which to analyze how televised presidential campaign advertisements contribute to the continued marginalization of those who fall outside of proscribed societal roles. Often, this positioning of masculine leadership is done at the expense of the opponent, situating the candidate as the only real choice to secure a robust masculinity in the White House. The conceptual opposition attempted in these kinds of advertisements provides a productive space for analysis of what patriarchal responsibilities are expected of a potential president. Also, representations of the candidate’s supposed sexual appeal are frequent. Early commercials feature torch singers crooning lyrics like “Adlai, I love you madly.” Other campaign spots feature displays of physical affection between the candidates and their wives. It is this adulation that offers a fertile ground for a discussion of continued feminine subjectivity, as wives and daughters of candidates are positioned as either props or liabilities in presidential campaigns (for instance, the swirl of public opinion contrasting Hillary Clinton and Barbara Bush during the 1992 campaign season.)

The compulsory insistence on heteronormativity is intrinsic to a successful candidacy, even as issues of gay rights and issues of gender diversity became more mainstream.

Far from only impacting the outcome of any given election, gender ideology has long influenced the development of national policy, both foreign and domestic. Hoganson and Bederman’s analysis of the Spanish American and Philippine Wars richly demonstrate this reality, and it holds no less true in the 20th century and beyond. Johnson’s work on the Lavender Scare of the early 1950’s that yielded a purge of State
Department employees illustrates an investment in appropriate gender performance, with homophobia resulting in exclusionary hiring practices that would be codified as policy for almost fifty years.\textsuperscript{20} As Dean demonstrates, Kennedy and Johnson’s escalation of involvement in Vietnam can be linked directly to a notion of vigorous masculinity promoted by the cultural elite of the era, and Johnson’s Great Society can be associated with the presidents’ popular presentation of himself as a protector of the poor children of America. I argue that televised campaign commercials serve as a contract between the candidate and the electorate, serving as an easily referenced list of promises that lay out the framework of the would-be president’s agenda, and gendered representations of the candidates, both victorious and unsuccessful, shaped subsequent administrations and led to the enactment of policies at home and abroad. As Melani McAlister articulates in \textit{Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East}, “foreign policy has a significant cultural component… understanding the political import of culture requires that we position cultural texts in history, as active producers of meaning, rather than assuming that they merely “reflect” or “reproduce” some preexisting social reality.”\textsuperscript{21} Campaign commercials act as these producers of meaning, and should not be neglected in any discussion of the ways that gender ideology shapes foreign and domestic policy.

In order to assess the full spectrum of communications materials produced by these campaigns, I worked with the helpful staff at several presidential libraries, including the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum (which houses the Victoria Schuck Collection of Moving Images, a


comprehensive collection of video materials dating back to 1950), The LBJ Presidential Library, the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum, the Jimmy Carter Library and Museum, and the George Bush Presidential Library and Museum. I also accessed materials from the Adlai E. Stevenson Papers collection at Princeton University’s Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, the Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics at the University of Kansas, and the Michael S. Dukakis Presidential Campaign records at Northeastern University. Additionally, the Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse provided an invaluable resource. The searchable database includes the transcripts of speeches, television ads and debates of twelve United States general election Presidential campaigns from 1952 to 1996. The collection begins September 1 of each election year and ends on election eve or day. Together, this collection provided a comprehensive archive of materials to examine, and taken as a whole, give confidence to the assessment that the presence of gender discourse was not an anecdotal occurrence or an anomaly, but instead a recurring thread within modern campaign communications.

These narratives of patriarchal leadership found in televised campaign communications reinforce the fable of patriarchal power defined by Filmer in 1680, reconstituted in a contemporary setting for an American audience. This study examines modern election cycles where the role of gender performance and patriarchal authority played a pivotal role in the candidates’ campaign discourse. Chapter 1 examines the presidential races of the 1950s between Adlai Stevenson and Dwight Eisenhower, an era fraught with concerns about a looming crisis of masculinity that occurred against the background of the rise of television broadcasting. The presidential campaign communications of 1952 were developed at the confluence of widespread gender anxiety
and its concomitant homophobia and the emergence of television as a dominant form of mass media; this whirlwind of circumstance created by the very nature of television and its space within the private realm provided the perfect conduit to inform Americans about gender performance and its importance when choosing the leader of the nation.

Chapter 2 explores the election of 1960, with emphasis on John F. Kennedy’s effort to demonstrate his personal autonomy against accusations that he was simply a pawn of his powerful church and his wealthy father. Kennedy leveraged representations of himself as a noble war hero and family man to carve a distinct identity imbued with the familiar tropes of War Hero and Beneficent Patriarch.

The election of 1980, played out against the Iran Hostage Crisis and its notion of subverted American masculinity provides the focus for Chapter 3. I argue that the media’s construction of and response to this crisis informed Ronald Reagan’s presidential campaigns, as well as his administration’s response to a breadth of domestic issues.

The intersection of race and gender is the focus of Chapter 4, an examination of the contest between seasoned Senator John McCain, and the young Senator from Illinois Barack Obama, the first African American candidate on a major party ticket. McCain and Obama both used well-worn tropes of masculinity to position themselves, yet gender did a different kind of productive work for Barack Obama. Specifically, Obama’s performance of gender as a part of a nuclear family, either as a son, father or husband, produced an intelligibility to his story as well as his candidacy. An investment in this patriarchal role is evident in the rhetoric the Obama administration uses to justify policy choices that range from the Lilly Ledbetter Equal Pay Act to gun control efforts resulting from the 2012 mass shooting in Newtown, Connecticut.
Finally, the conclusion considers the effects that an investment in patriarchal authority and appropriate masculine gender performance has on women candidates for the presidency. If the presidency itself is a gendered institution, there has been no opportunity for a woman to disrupt the notion that the presidency could be successfully held by a woman, no chance that the daily culture of masculinity could be mitigated by an individual with a feminine gender performance. Though none have made it to the “big show” yet, the experiences of Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton lend insights to the challenges faced by future candidates. The conclusion considers the presidential race of 2008 as an opportunity to look at the ways that female candidates chose to represent themselves as appropriately feminine while simultaneously positioning themselves as possessing the capacity to lead the nation, particularly the ways that the campaigns navigated around possible pitfalls of motherhood and domesticity, while simultaneously claiming expertise on domestic and international issues as a result of their experiences as mothers and wives.
Dwight D. Eisenhower fits easily into the typical mold of an American president. From his rugged boyhood in Abilene, Kansas to his role as a star player on West Point’s football team, to his status as a five-star general during World War II as the Supreme Allied Commander of Allied Forces, Eisenhower’s public identity was forged by meeting the demands of a rigorous masculinity, marked by physical stamina and military service. It is of little surprise that Eisenhower made a run for the presidency in 1952, a position that would literally and figuratively cap his accomplishments as a leader of men, the personification of masculine authority. The election results of 1952 and 1956 mirror what was evident in public opinion: in Gallup’s annual poll, Eisenhower was declared the most admired living American man every year from 1952-1960, a span that reflects each year of his elected service. Yet though most folks seemed to “like Ike,” the Republican faced challenges to demonstrate his own corporeal strengths and robustness, as well as his appropriate performances of gender identity. This reality is particularly interesting in light of Eisenhower’s Democratic opponent in both elections, Adlai Stevenson, a divorced man (and accused homosexual) and an “egghead” academic. The two would go head-to-head for the presidency during both election cycles, and an analysis of their campaign television commercials, a new medium for this era, as well as the larger political discourse, reveals the role of a demonstrable masculine identity in the competition between the two to establish themselves as the ideal leader of post-war America.
The presidential campaign communications of 1952 were developed at the confluence of widespread gender anxiety and its concomitant homophobia and the emergence of television as a dominant form of mass media; this whirlwind of circumstance created by the very nature of television and its space within the private realm provided the perfect conduit to inform Americans about gender performance and its importance when choosing the leader of the nation. While American presidents had always conformed to traditional gender tropes, from the rugged Old Hickory Andrew Jackson to rough riding Theodore Roosevelt, never before had there been the ability to bring the representation of that gender performance directly into voters’ homes visually as well as verbally. The convergence of the emergence of television broadcasting and gender anxiety contributed to campaign communications from both parties that affirmed and reconstituted an insistence upon traditional gender performance while also serving as a proving ground for what kinds of advertising campaigns were successful in this new medium. As can be seen as early as 1956, the campaigns quickly maneuvered to replicate the spots perceived to be most effective, particularly those that represented the candidate as a concerned patriarch with a solution to the domestic ills of the nation. Importantly, this model of representation would sustain itself throughout the 20th century and beyond.

This chapter examines the presidential elections of the 1950s not only as the starting point for televised campaign commercials occurring against the backdrop of the “crisis of masculinity,” but also as a reflection of what historian Elaine Tyler May has called “domestic containment,” an effort to throw off fears produced by Cold War militancy through an adherence to a conservative, supposedly traditional, domestic ideology. This investment in the nuclear family, as well as its reproductive capacities,
were perceived as vital to national security, necessary to create the peace so longed-for following the tumult created by World War II. The trope of a father fighting to protect this pastoral image of the American family emerges throughout the campaign rhetoric of the 1950s of both Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson.

As would be expected, both Eisenhower’s and Stevenson’s campaigns attempt to exploit the opponent’s perceived weaknesses as well as shore up their own. Importantly, these dueling narratives evidence a clearly gendered approach to the traditional opponent attack. An examination of both campaigns’ television spots, as well as other ephemera from the decade, demonstrates the weaponization of accusations of effeminacy as a recurring tactic in the battle for the presidency during the 1950s. While the influence of the medium of television has been well researched, little discussion has been given to the dueling narratives of marginalized masculinity that emerged in this new media conversation between the candidates for the presidency. This chapter details the televisual salvos used by the Republican and Democratic campaigns of both 1952 and 1956 to undermine their opponent’s masculinity, as well as demonstrates the tactics used to resist these efforts. In particular, my analysis seeks to retrieve Stevenson’s filmed campaign communications from the archives and to restore their narratives to consideration as an important part of presidential campaign history.

If Eisenhower’s manhood had been solidly proven on the battleground, Adlai Stevenson’s gender performance faced multiple challenges, including his divorce and public perception as an intellectual. The cultural climate of the era worked to combine these characteristics into a kind of queerness, though not initially articulated as homosexuality. By the 1956 election, the two had become conflated, with Stevenson’s
marginalized masculinity now an indicator of his homosexuality. Stevenson’s campaign commercials served both as a defense of his own masculine identity and as an attack on the masculinity of his opponent, and provide an understanding of how the presidential campaigns of the 1950s mirrored an anxiety about gender roles and performance percolating within the larger American discourse. Scholars have generally dismissed these films because they do not fit into the traditional paradigm of a spot campaign or because their production values were minimal; however, they are vitally important in order to understand the role not only of homophobia but also of heteronormativity in the political campaigns of this era. Finally, these first television campaigns created tropes of demonstrable masculinity that are still seen in national politics today.

The Crisis of Masculinity and Domestic Containment: Setting the Stage for the Introduction of Television Campaign Communications

The contest between the General and the Egghead provides an interesting frame to consider what has been called the “crisis of masculinity” of the 1950s. Emerging technologies that changed the middle-class experience of work, as well as fears about the role of the United State on the international stage, contributed to an emerging sense that cultural change was marginalizing the social as well as financial power of the average American man. James Gilbert’s Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s (2005) summarizes the fears of masculine decline: “The effects of conformity, suburban life, and mass culture were depicted as feminizing and debasing, and the proposed solution often lay in a renewal of traditional masculine vigor and individualism.”22 The crisis of masculinity seemed to demand a movement toward increased autonomy and individuality, an answer to anxieties provoked by the influential 1950 text, The Lonely

22 Gilbert, pg. 4.
Crowd, a sociological reflection on the evolution of the American character. Widely read, the book was received as a warning about the problems inherent in being “other-directed”; instead of individuality and independence, American men were sheep that flocked toward consumer happiness and succor. Coupled with the 1956 publication of The Organization Man (a profile on the pitfalls of group-think in the corporate world) and the 1955 novel (and later film) The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, popular culture reflected an American manhood that was languishing amidst consumer culture and a longing for a move away from emasculating conformity. By 1958, historian Arthur M. Schlesinger asked readers of Esquire:

What has happened to the American male? For a long time, he seemed utterly confident in his manhood, sure of his masculine role in society, easy and definite in his sense of sexual identity. The frontiersmen of James Fennimore Cooper, for example, never had any concern about masculinity; they were men, and it did not occur to them to think twice about it. Even well into the twentieth century, the heroes of Dreiser, of Fitzgerald, of Hemingway remain men. But one begins to detect a new theme emerging in some of these authors, especially in Hemingway: the theme of the male hero increasingly preoccupied with proving his virility to himself. And by mid-century, the male role had plainly lost its rugged clarity of outline. Today men are more and more conscious of maleness not as a fact but as a problem. The ways by which American men affirm their masculinity are uncertain and obscure. There are multiplying signs, indeed, that something has gone badly wrong with the American male's conception of himself.23

As Eisenhower and Stevenson battled for the presidency both in 1952 and 1956, their efforts to demonstrate themselves as the best man for the job were not only mediated by popular efforts to define and support an evolving American masculinity, but also contributed to the discourse surrounding gendered behavior.

Both Eisenhower and Stevenson would struggle with how to define themselves within the discourse of a faltering American manhood, and evidence of this endeavor is

apparent in their campaign communications. For the purposes of this analysis, a
definition of masculinity provided in RW Connell’s definitive work, *Masculinities*,
“masculinity is what men ought to be.”²⁴ She notes that media studies often deploy this
normative definition of masculinity: individuals find models presented to them in the
media or larger culture that provide an example of how to be a man in the world.
Archetypes of like film stars Humphrey Bogart or John Wayne, or the literary figures
referenced by Schlesinger, provided easily accessible exemplars of what men ought to be:
tough, independent, decisive, and strongly protective of women and children. Review of
the candidates campaign commercials shows an investment in this normative masculinity,
depicting their candidate as an example of what a man ought to be, while simultaneously
pointing out how the opposition does not measure up.

While the home and the nuclear family dynamic were at the center of popular
discourse in the 1950s, construction of a homosexual identity was simultaneously
occurring in the halls of power, particularly at the federal level. Behaviors and
mannerisms that were once merely questionable became codified as queer. Suspected
homosexuals were summarily dismissed from positions in the state department, denied
immigration status, and deprived of entitlement benefits like the G.I. Bill.²⁵ “The state’s
identification of certain sexual behaviors, gender traits, and emotional ties as grounds for
exclusion…was a catalyst in the formation of homosexual identity. The state, in other
words, did not merely implicate but also *constituted* homosexuality in the construction of

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²⁵ A detailed discussion of the “lavender scare” that defined homosexuals as national security risks and brought
about the firing of ninety-one people from the State Department in 1950 is detailed in David K. Johnson’s *The
a stratified citizenry.”26 This constitution of homosexuality was not contingent only upon an intimate sexual congress but also on perceptions about personal traits that were visible beyond the bedroom. The vilification of not only queerness, but also of inefficient gender performance, is ample in the presidential campaigns of 1952, as the candidates sought not only to demonstrate their own bona fides as legitimate members of what Canaday calls “the straight state,” but also in accusations of their opponent’s supposed lavender tendencies. Homosexuality and citizenship were mutually constitutive, and those that “exhibited gender inversion or engaged in homoerotic behavior [were] either outside or degraded within citizenship.”27 As Jennifer Terry notes of the era, the display of virile masculinity and submissive wives was central to a domestic paradigm that would effectively fight international threats. “Through healthy heterosexuality involving the two halves of nature’s intended whole, the nation’s future security could be ensured. Homosexuality, associated popularly with gender inversion and sexual perversion, symbolized a dangerous affront to this idealized image of the perfect home and family. Not surprisingly, anyone who disturbed the foundations of the family and the gender roles that underpinned it came to be regarded as a threat to the nation’s security.”28 Further, fatherhood and marriage were vital to conform to the standards of American male gender performance. A recent history on the changes in American fatherhood over time notes that those who chose not to participate in a visible reproductive role faced strong social sanctions and faced the stigma of "Men who neither married nor assumed the responsibilities of fatherhood and breadwinning, so went the argument, began a

27 Ibid. pg. 13
precipitous slide toward homosexuality…Overt homosexuality soon followed unless the man overcame his adaptive failures, presumably by getting married, having children and becoming a successful breadwinner.” ²⁹

Homosexuality was constructed not only as a national threat but a personal ailment, particularly within the era’s consideration of what Carolyn Herbst Lewis calls “prescriptive heterosexuality.” This notion grounds the idea that homosexuality is pathology, not only outside of the norm, but a disease, a reflection of a corrupted body and mind. Domestic containment and prescriptive heterosexuality are factored into discussion not only of how accusations of homosexuality and gender nonconformity tainted both Eisenhower’s and Stevenson’s campaign communications, but also how Eisenhower’s heart attack of 1955 evidenced a leader weakened by physical disease.

Mass Media and Presidential Campaigns: Radio, Television, and the Intimacy of the Home
While television communications are the emphasis of this study, an overview of radio communications from previous elections provides a frame through which to understand how the electorate was prepared to receive spot advertisements from both the Republican and Democratic campaigns. Radio broadcasting emerged in the 1920s, reaching a national saturation rate of 80 percent by 1937. National networks were in place that broadcast all matter of informational and entertainment content, from serialized dramatic thrillers and soap operas to news documentaries and quiz shows. In terms of political communication, most scholars agree that Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Fireside Chats,” a staple of his presidency from 1933 until his death in 1944, served as the most influential of these broadcasts. Topics of the chats ranged from information about war

efforts in Europe and Japan to updates on pending coal strikes. Though not specifically intended as persuasive campaign communications, the Fireside Chats laid the groundwork for audience members to form opinions about politicians and policies, serving as the precursor for broadcast political advertisements. Radio scholar Jason Loviglio argues that one of the most important accomplishments of these communications bridged the private/public divide:

The chats were successful because of the way they conflated radio listening with national identity, inviting listeners to participate in the invention of the new public realm of radio reception from the comfort of their own homes…In the intimate public of radio, Roosevelt invited his audience back and forth across the boundaries of public and private, retracing in worth the authorized transgressions of the New Deal. In the process, the early Fireside Chats made themselves at home in the emerging patterns of radio reception. 30

As Loviglio’s work demonstrates, listeners responded well to FDR’s approach, with each broadcast followed by a cascade of thousands of letters to the White House. Through the new technology of radio, the President was able to forge a relationship with his constituency that was mutually beneficial: he was able to communicate with them; they believed they were able to communicate with him. This intimacy forged by Roosevelt would set the standard for the creation of subsequent political communications, particularly as the development of mass media technology grew to include the visual elements provide by television.

Harry Truman’s campaign in 1948 would also embrace the power of radio broadcasting, though he would pursue the intimate connection between himself and the audience differently than Roosevelt. Instead of purchasing airtime or leveraging his position as the sitting president to procure space on the evening line-up, Truman turned

his whistle-stop campaign into a media event. Attendance at barnstorming events was irrelevant; it was the people at home that were important. Commenting on one poorly attended rally in Omaha, Truman said to a supporter, 'I don't give a damn whether there's nobody there but you and me. I am making a speech on the radio to the farmers. They won't be there — they'll be at home listening to that radio. They're the ones I am going to talk to.' An underdog in the race, Truman assumed the position of a scrapper. Instead of the polished radio campaign of his Republican opponent New York Governor Thomas Dewey (produced by BBDO, the firm that would produce Eisenhower’s television spots), Truman was blunt and spoke with a common approach. He was able to harness the intimate power of radio to reach into the domestic spaces of would-be voters. Many credit his ability to work within the paradigm of free media with his unexpected victory.

Though some television advertisements were developed for President Harry Truman’s campaign in 1948, these messages were 30-minute narrative films as opposed to the 30-second spots similar to modern commercial advertisements, and very few American households owned the sets by 1948. The percentage of households with television would be significantly different by the next election, a reality reflected in the broadcast communications of both campaigns.

Enter Television: The Role of New Media on the Presidential Campaign

The presidential election of 1952 marked the first widespread use of television as a medium to distribute campaign communications. Prior to its development, candidates

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approached their outreach to voters through personal appearances. The “whistle-stop” campaigns that preceded television involved transcontinental rail travel from town to town and state to state, with oratorical flourishes flaunted in stump speeches and rallies. The introduction of radio broadcasting in the 1920s provided the first entrée into mass media for presidential campaigns, and allowed the candidates to reach out to would-be voters personally and en masse, but did little to disturb the primacy of the spoken word as the principal mechanism of communication.

As described above, many have described the notion of intimacy created through these radio communications, lending itself to the perception of dialogue as opposed to oratory, yet the medium was still auditory; the emergence of this new technology would bring about significant changes in how candidates communicated with the electorate. The visual representation of the candidates brought a new element to be reckoned with, requiring a consideration of how the candidate would look and what the setting of the communication would be. This intimacy was now even more pronounced: instead of a disembodied voice entering the average American home, the campaign now had the capability to project the image of their candidate directly into the private sphere. The ability to virtually enter the home created an opportunity for the candidate to comment on gender through visual and as well as verbal tropes in ways previously impossible.

The penetration rate of televisions in American households during that election cycle was minimal; radio communications were the main broadcasting apparatus for reaching would-be voters. By 1952, television set ownership ranged from 17-19

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33 Gil Troy’s See How They Ran (1991) provides a general overview of the transitory steps made between the “whistle-stop” campaigns of the 1890s and early 1900s and the radio age. Pg. 160-173
million households, and 110 stations were on the air in thirty-three states. Though it should not be assumed that the Eisenhower and Stevenson television commercials reached the entirety of the electorate, it should be understood that these communications served as a new kind of weapon of persuasive communications. Scholars of presidential campaign communications, as well as the broadcasting and advertising industries, have documented the importance of this campaign, from cost expenditures to the strategies and tactics behind the development of the spots themselves. The Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse indicates that the Stevenson campaign produced only 11 spot ads during the election cycle of 1952, while the Eisenhower campaign produced 33. Some of this discrepancy can be attributed to financial concerns, but most scholars believe Stevenson’s dismissal of the format as a sort of technological hucksterism was at the center of the decision to avoid a widespread television advertising campaign.

Campaign advisors were trying to understand the utility of this new method of communications, much like all Americans. In 1952, television itself was new, and families were not always sure how this new mode of communication was to be integrated into the landscape of their lives. The set needed to be integrated into the American living room, a piece of furniture to be more than accommodated; it was to be visible to all would-be viewers in the family, the father on the couch, the mother in the kitchen. Television executives declared that that television would soon become “the shining


center of the home.” Some studies indicate that the integration of the television into the home was widely perceived as a boon to family unity, bringing the generations together in one room at one time, serving to dissuade from other activities outside of the home. One thing was clear: television, both the device itself, as well as the concept, was clearly anchored within the sphere of the domestic realm.

The idea of the confluence of television and domesticity makes the campaign commercials of 1952 and 1956 particularly important because this period marks the emergence of television as a ubiquitous media for the average American, and as with the radio, television effortlessly entered the intimate space of the home, bringing with it not just the aural but the visual imagery of the outside world. Instead of trooping to the theatre to see newsreels and moving pictures, Americans now had full-time access to the entertainment and informational programming provided by their television sets. While television occupied a physical presence in the domestic space, it also inhabited a space in the American imagination, serving as a guide to the wider world, a metaphorical window to the domestic and international landscape, creating a reason to occupy the physical space instead of the home instead of venturing into the public space.

Almost consecutive in their arrival on the American landscape, many argue that television and the Cold War were co-constitutive. News programming as well as fictional drama and comedy featured narratives that included nuclear bombkings, Russian spies and communist infiltrators. The frequent occurrences of these themes helped to produce the social and political fears of the era, as well as framed a popular understanding of

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American foreign policy. “Rather than criticize government policy, which was already generating a spirited East-West arms race, television rationalized, even justified, such militarism.”

Television’s narrative strength would be brought to bear in domestic politics as well as international affairs, serving as a model for the glut of new nuclear families created in the post-war population explosion. Emphasis on depiction of the nuclear family in entertainment programming was widespread, featuring wholesome fare like *The Ozzie and Harriet Show* and *I Love Lucy*. These situation comedies, often set within the domestic sphere the home, represented the domestic ideal of a reproductive couple and their offspring, navigating the personal challenges of their own lives and their relationships to one another. Typically these tensions were easily resolved in the span of the episode; wives that wanted to work outside of the home met folly and recognized their proper place, sons that thought they knew more than their fathers were revealed to be incompetent. The importance of these kinds of programs rests in their presence in the home itself. As with its predecessor radio broadcasting, television communications breeched the barrier between public and private, and creating an intimacy with the audience while simultaneously showing them representations of themselves, setting the standard of what familial relationships should look like. The omission of other kinds of interpersonal dynamics essentially erased other versions of either relationships or gender performance, reiterating the ideological investment in domestic containment.

Both Stevenson and Eisenhower launched their television advertising campaigns into this landscape of television programming, already a politicized space with an emphasis on domestic and international affairs. The Eisenhower campaign made more

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effective use of television than did the Stevenson campaign, enhancing its inherent intimacy by producing staged conversations between Ike and representations of the average voter. The campaign hired a leading advertising agency to create a series of twenty-two 20-second spots that began with a supposedly average citizen asking the candidate what he intended to do about a challenging issues, from the cost of living to involvement in the Korean War. Eisenhower then looked directly into the camera and answered with folksy aplomb, and gave a generally non-specific answer. This direct gaze from an internationally known figure like the General contributed to this sense of intimacy and domesticity, creating a relationship with the candidate, and this relationship contributed to Ike’s ability to talk about what would otherwise be construed as matters inappropriate for casual discussion, like personal finance.

Over twenty “Eisenhower Answers America” spots were prepared and broadcast during the election season and each followed the same pattern: shot in black and white, the screen featured a logo for the Eisenhower campaign, as a booming voice from a male narrator announced “Eisenhower Answers America.” The film would then cut to a shot of an average voter (or sometimes a family cluster composed of a marital couple or a mother with children) as they asked a question. The film would then quick cut again to Eisenhower in the full frame, looking off to the side for a few moments, assumedly at the person who had asked the question. Ike would then move his glance from the voter to the camera, creating the impression that he was speaking directly to the home audience. The

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40 Craig Allen’s *Eisenhower and the Mass Media: Peace, Prosperity, & Prime-Time TV* details many of the methods that the Eisenhower administration used to deal with this new media. This text describes the client relationship between Eisenhower’s campaign operatives and the Batten, Barton, Durstine and Osborn (BBDO) advertising agency, the group responsible for the development of the “Eisenhower Answers America” commercials.
following examples serve as an illustration of the ways that Eisenhower used television to address issues concerning domestic issues:

WOMAN: You know what things cost today. High prices are just driving me crazy.

EISENHOWER: Yes, my Mamie gets after me about the high cost of living. It's another reason why I say it's time for a change, time to get back to an honest dollar and an honest dollar's worth.

Another spot features a middle-aged woman addressing Eisenhower as her children stand with her:

WOMAN: I live carefully on my budget. Why can't the government do the same?

EISENHOWER: It can. It should. Yet Democratic spending has gone from $4 billion to $85 billion a year. This reckless spending has got to stop. It's time for a change.

One of the spots features an elderly man, dressed in a respectable suit and tie, plaintively expressing his frustration to the Eisenhower:

MAN: I'm 66. I can't live on my Social Security. Nobody can.

EISENHOWER: I stand for expanded Social Security and more real benefits. Believe me, sir, if I am president, I'll give you older folks action, not just sympathy.

Finally, the concerns of young men are represented by a young man in a jacket and tie, representing middle-class concerns about the inability to rise to the domestic ideal of the era:

MAN: General, I'd like to get married but we couldn't live on the salary I get after taxes.

EISENHOWER: Well, the Democrats are sinking deeper into a bottomless sea of debt and demanding more taxes to keep their confused heads above water. Let's put in a sturdy lifeboat in November.

"Eisenhower Answers America" plays upon the same tactic of public intimacy that Roosevelt perfected in his Fireside Chats. Thanks to editing techniques, the spots appear as though Ike is speaking directly to the voter, then with a pivot of his head,
directly to the home audience. Each of the 22 commercials focuses on issues within the private sphere, positioning him as a cure to domestic ills that range from the myriad taxes on foodstuffs to the precarious financial situation of pensioners. A vote for the Republican even works to retrieve the subverted manhood of the young man seeking to take on his rightful role as a patriarch, unable to create his own domestic space under the Democratic administration. Eisenhower readily draws the analogy between the state and the family when he compares the budgetary constraints of the two: on his election, Ike will step in as the patriarch with the solution to these economic woes. By occupying the popular imagination not only as a decorated war hero but also as Mamie's husband, the candidate becomes more like the voter and less like an elite celebrity. Embracing the inherent domesticity of television, the advertisements enter the home as the candidate speaks about the conflicts and concerns central to that domestic space. Note that Eisenhower does not articulate a specific plan or policy that will bring about the solutions he promises. Instead, he evokes his role as a husband to lend credibility to his consideration of domestic economies.

There was great value behind creating a virtual relationship with the candidate and the voter. Like never before, video editing techniques and broadcasting technology created a semblance of a relationship with the would-be voter. The framework of "Eisenhower Answers America" capitalizes on the intimacy of television: supposedly average Americans gain access to one of the most famous and powerful men in the world, pose a question, and are answered with dignity. Their financial woes are of concern to Eisenhower individually, and by extension, to the state that he would govern. Interestingly, though the issues of the Korean War and defense preparedness were
featured in the "Eisenhower Answers America" campaign, the majority of the spots discuss domestic issues, particularly financial ones. Of the 22 spots in the campaign, only 3 of them, or 13%, addressed Korea or other international concerns. The remaining 87% focused on taxes, inflation or government graft. Ike's leadership on the battlefield (a marker of his manhood) was well known; the campaign provided him an opportunity to establish himself as the beneficent patriarch, concerned not just with turmoil abroad but the tranquility of domestic spaces.

The mode of transmission is an important consideration for any discussion of television spot advertising, and particularly relevant to campaign spots: these communications interrupt another narrative, be it informational or entertainment programming. Thus, the viewer is asked to postpone cognitive attention to their program and attune to the brief communication encapsulated in this spot. Instead of creating a dissonance between these fictional programs featuring representations of American home life, “Eisenhower Answers America” fits easily into the mindspace of the viewer as a paternal Eisenhower voices concern about domestic difficulties. And viewers of the era would have found it difficult to avoid this series of commercials. Starting in late October through Election Day, voters in 40-48 states were exposed to “Eisenhower Answers America.” Architect of the campaign Rosser Reeves wanted high saturation levels in key states like Florida and Virginia, with viewer exposure to the spots at four to five times per day. 41 When the average voter entered the booth, it is easy to imagine that a vision of General Dwight D. Eisenhower speaking of domestic concerns accompanied him or her. This candidate, himself imbued with an intrinsic normative masculinity as a warrior hero, husband, and father, would be the man to set the nation back on track, creating an

America that allowed its citizens to participate fully in their natural gender roles, natural gender roles illustrated on the programs they enjoyed as a family within the intimacy of their own homes.

In addition to the “Eisenhower Answers America” spots, the campaign also produced several memorable minute-long commercials, including the animated “I Like Ike,” depicting Americans of all stripes marching to Washington, DC at the lead of an Uncle Sam figure. Another notable spot was “The Man from Abilene,” anchoring Eisenhower’s credibility in his homespun boyhood and his military prowess. A booming voice over, similar in style to those featured in wartime newsreels details Eisenhower’s strengths as a leader, while the visual images of American soldiers storming the beaches of Europe intercut with images of a map of the United States with Eisenhower’s face transposed on it:

MALE NARRATOR #1 (voice echoing): The man from Abilene.

[TEXT: The MAN FROM ABILENE]

MALE NARRATOR #1: Out of the heartland of America, out of this small frame house in Abilene, Kansas, came a man, Dwight D. Eisenhower. Through the crucial hour of historic D-Day, he brought us to the triumph and peace of VE Day. Now, another crucial hour in our history—the big question:

The visual then cuts to an unnamed middle-aged man wearing a suit, who poses a question to the candidate:

MAN: General, if war comes, is this country really ready?

The film then cuts again to Eisenhower, looking off camera, seemingly at the man who posed the question, then looking directly at the camera, addressing the viewer:

EISENHOWER: It is not. The Administration has spent many billions of dollars for national defense. Yet today, we haven't enough tanks for the
fighting in Korea. It is time for a change.

The film reverts again to quick cuts of Eisenhower walking alongside Winston Churchill, Ike at the Republican national convention, and in throngs of American well-wishers at a V-E parade.

MALE NARRATOR #1: The nation, haunted by the stalemate in Korea, looks to Eisenhower. Eisenhower knows how to deal with the Russians. He has met Europe’s leaders, has got them working with us. Elect the number one man for the number one job of our time.

(Voice echoing) November 4th vote for peace. Vote for Eisenhower.

Voters are called on to “Elect the number one man for the number one job of our time,” with the understanding that a man born in a small wooden house in the Midwest was instilled with an identity that would appeal to Americans looking for a populist leader. The spot situates Ike as a self-made man, an individual that earned his high-ranking position as a result of his own efforts and accomplishments, not through inheritance or luck. This representation of self-creation harks back to narratives in previous presidential campaigns, including those of iconic presidents Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt (himself the epitome of contrived masculinity). Beyond demonstrating the candidate’s humble origins, the spot itself evokes memories of a wartime newsreel, with the announcer’s booming voice and visual images of soldiers storming the beach at Normandy and General Eisenhower walking with Winston Churchill. Ike’s leadership skills are unquestioned in this representation of his biography.

Eisenhower’s approach to television advertising was to demonstrate himself not only as a man of the people, but also as a man that did not need surrogates to speak for him. This method of direct communication with the voter was a marked difference in the 1952
television campaigns of Stevenson and Eisenhower. While Ike (already a known-on-sight celebrity) spoke directly to the camera, and by extension the American people, Stevenson did not appear in his own commercials. Instead, others represented the positions of the candidate. Eisenhower’s spots depicted conversations between the General and the average American, often critiquing the Democratic Party, if not Stevenson himself. In contrast, Stevenson never appeared in his spots, but instead used surrogates to lob accusations at Eisenhower. This lack of direct, side-by-side comparison between the two coalesced well with perceptions of Stevenson as less forceful and aggressive than his opponent, and by extension, less likely to be a forceful leader on the international stage. Importantly, the campaign commercials served as the primary televisual representation of the two men: there were no debates between the candidates, televised or otherwise, and thusly never a direct confrontation between the two candidates for voters to assess.

Though certainly not as sophisticated as the advertising team hired by Eisenhower, Stevenson’s team produced a few spot commercials, but generally focused on longer campaign films, shown in twenty and thirty-minute blocks of purchased airtime. These films were typically more similar to a situation comedy or drama then a commercial for a product or service. One such production, titled “The Stevenson Bandwagon,” presented a fictional Republican Campaign Headquarters office, with the plot featuring staffers attempting to come up with campaign songs for their candidate. Three young women, featured as clerical staff, serve as background singers for two men who appear as songwriters for the Republicans. After some discussion about potential songs as would be expected, the positive attributes of Adlai Stevenson take center stage instead, and the campaign headquarters instead becomes a “Democratic Outpost.”
Interestingly, Eisenhower’s name is never explicitly mentioned in the entire program, instead praising Stevenson without dismantling any of the opponent’s flaws. The only explicit criticism levied is against others in Republican leadership, including a song that mentions Senators Dirksen, McCarthy and Taft. The songwriting duo declares in an upbeat tempo, “There’s no sense in pointing out one single case. They simply are ‘anti’ the whole human race.” The unwillingness to confront his direct opponent Dwight Eisenhower positions Stevenson, even through these fictional surrogates, as passive and non-confrontational, qualities that work to undermine Stevenson’s persona as a decisive leader able to deal with the nation’s challenges.

Another such film takes a more dramatic turn, depicting office workers stuck in an elevator during an air raid. Two men in suits debate the merits of Eisenhower and Stevenson, while a young female secretary listens in. After much discussion, the Eisenhower supporter moves to the Stevenson side, and the young woman quickly follows suit. A comparison between this spot and “The Man from Abilene” reveals some of the conflicting representations of American masculinity in the 1950s. Eisenhower’s advocates are former prime ministers and other military leaders; Stevenson’s are the gentrified “organization men” of William Whyte, or the corporate conformists of David Reisman’s *The Lonely Crowd*. The imagery of Eisenhower’s campaign demonstrates an independent, self-made man at ease with domestic issues as well as international affairs. The imagery of Stevenson’s campaign features women singing songs, and corporate executives, the epitome of the “other-directed” man, debating his merits. The contrast is striking in an era concerned with the supposed crisis of masculinity, the two tropes of manhood serving to illustrate the choice the voter must make between the men who
would to lead the nation.

The Democratic Campaign was not unaware of the need to buttress demonstrable masculine identity for their candidate, and the thematics of Stevenson’s longer films labored to produce a counterargument against his perceived effeminacy, not only by situating him as a decisive, desirable man, but through attacks on “the General” that might work to feminize Eisenhower as a submissive, possibly homosexual pawn in the machinations of the Republican Party. These films have largely been ignored by scholars because they do not fit the typical construction of the campaign commercial, dismissed as “short advertisements with silly jingles.” Nevertheless, these films evidence not only a resistance to the characterization of Stevenson as an effeminate intellectual, but also actively position Eisenhower as a submissive, feminized figure. An analysis of songs and dialogue included in these campaign films demonstrate that the Stevenson campaign actively engaged in the same sorts of gender politics that inadvertently worked to undermine their own candidate.

**Divorcee, Egghead, Adeline: Stevenson’s Damaged Masculinity**

With traditional domesticity on the cultural forefront, divorce was considered a threat not only to the well-being of the individual family, but also to the fabric of the nation as a whole. Statistics on the history of divorce in American indicate that by 1950, women were granted divorce decrees almost three times as often as men, and that those women who sought divorce were or had been employed outside the home. These ruptures in the perceived traditional paradigm of dependence between the genders were widely

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held to be problematic, not only among cultural arbiters like the church, but by scientific bodies like the American Medical Association. Popular magazines like *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Reader’s Digest* offered up insights on what may have caused the increasing trend, as well as how individuals might avoid this fate themselves.\textsuperscript{43}

Popular discussion of Adlai Stevenson’s personal life reflected these fears and stigmas, and worked to demasculanize the candidate. In September 1949, during his first year as Governor of Illinois, his wife Ellen Borden Stevenson filed for divorce. The story broke in the Chicago Herald American in late September, when Ellen established temporary residence in Las Vegas, Nevada (known for its lax divorce laws) to hasten the dissolution of the marriage. Ellen was granted a divorce in December of that year on the grounds of “mental cruelty.”

Within the rhetoric and discourse of the early 1950s, an intact family was necessary not only to sustain the morals and culture of the United States, but also to guarantee a literal and physical survival in the event of atomic attack. Civil defense materials of the time specifically addressed the gendered responsibilities of the men and women of the nation: mother/wife was responsible for the food gathering, maintenance and preparation, while father/husband was responsible for home protection. It is impossible to imagine how a White House without a First Lady would be able to serve as the model for a civil defense plan entrenched in the gendered norms of the nuclear family. May’s notion of domestic containment demands a woman at the center of the narrative, and Stevenson’s lack of a wife not only demonstrates his failures as a beneficent patriarchal leader, but also removes a key player from the supposed strategy to

survive nuclear annihilation. Laura McEleney’s work details the militarization of the home:

Much as in the military, family warriors would not act as self-interested soldiers but as part of a corporate whole, unified in interests and purpose...Popular media, political, and social scientific discourses extolled nuclear family formation and stigmatized anything else. Diverse groups of opinion leaders, especially politicians, psychologists, and advertisers, defined the family as a defense against political subversion, gender and sexual deviance, and myriad social problems. In the context of McCarthyism and the Cold War, home and family represented national security-broadly defined.44

Adlai Stevenson’s family was simply not up to meeting this standard for national security. It should be noted that just six days prior to the announcement of Mrs. Stevenson’s departure from her marriage, Americans were told that the Soviets conducted their first atomic weapon test in August 1949. The threat of apocalyptic war that had been at the margins of the national conscience was now front and center, just as the Stevenson family was disintegrating.45

In 1952, Stevenson’s divorce was considered a liability by mainstream media, though not acknowledged by the candidate himself. A Time Magazine profile of the candidate in August 1952 addressed the matter directly, paraphrasing Stevenson: “He said he did not consider his divorce a political hazard—‘which is not to say that my misfortune is any easier to bear, or that I approve of divorce.’”46 Though Stevenson shrugged off the issue, it was clearly a point of discussion among the electorate:

At a caucus of the Massachusetts delegation, predominantly Roman Catholic, one delegate brought up the divorce question. Another said Stevenson couldn't be blamed for the divorce, because his wife divorced him. Said the delegate: "Hell, half of our wives would divorce us if they

46 Time 8/25/1952, Vol. 60 Issue 8, p13
could." A roar of laughter swept the caucus room. On the third ballot, Massachusetts cast 25 of its 36 votes for divorced Adlai Stevenson.  

Though the delegate is making light of the divorce, the gendered critique of Stevenson’s divorce is inherent. Stevenson “let” his wife divorce him; he was not the authority in power, Mrs. Stevenson was. It is this lack of masculine power inherent in the understanding of divorce that worked to undermine his masculinity. As May has demonstrated, the performance of traditional gender roles in the domestic spaces of the Cold War era allowed Americans to create a microcosm of safety and security unattainable when juxtaposed to external threats. Stevenson’s inability to create and maintain this safe space of domestic integrity was evidence of a masculine identity not quite up to the rigorous demands of the era. He lacked the wherewithal to control a woman who had the financial capacity to do without him.

Not directly articulated by the delegate quoted above, there were issues of social class that set the Stevenson divorce outside of the American mainstream. Ellen Borden was a rich socialite from a prestigious Chicago family, with her own financial means outside of the marriage. These funds allowed her to leave her marriage at her own discretion without the possible financial constraints of those alluded-to delegates’ wives, who would divorce the men “if they could.” This wealth, so intrinsic to popular perception of Stevenson’s family, provided the resources required for Ellen’s gender insubordination and Adlai’s marginalization.

Stevenson’s class status would be another tool in the Republican arsenal to attack his masculinity and support its own candidates’ gender performance. It would create a direct contrast between the Democratic and Republican tickets. Just a month after

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Stevenson’s nomination, Senator Richard Nixon, Eisenhower’s vice-presidential running mate, was able to leverage his identity as a father and husband to salvage his position on the ticket amidst accusations of campaign finance impropriety. When questioned about a fund that was allegedly liquidated for personal use, the Republican Party purchased airtime for Nixon to allow him to personally address the situation. On a set built to look like an average American tract home, complete with bookshelves, a fireplace, and small office, the candidate would make his case. After approximately fifteen minutes of humiliating details about the Nixon family’s personal finances, including life insurance policies and outstanding mortgage debt, the California Senator took a staunch position in defense of his wife and daughters:

Well, that's about it. That's what we have. And that's what we owe. It isn't very much. But Pat and I have the satisfaction that every dime that we've got is honestly ours. I should say this, that Pat doesn't have a mink coat. But she does have a respectable Republican cloth coat, and I always tell her she'd look good in anything.

One other thing I probably should tell you, because if I don't they'll probably be saying this about me, too. We did get something, a gift, after the election. A man down in Texas heard Pat on the radio mention the fact that our two youngsters would like to have a dog. And believe it or not, the day before we left on this campaign trip we got a message from Union Station in Baltimore, saying they had a package for us. We went down to get it. You know what it was? It was a little cocker spaniel dog in a crate that he'd sent all the way from Texas, black and white, spotted. And our little girl Tricia, the six year old, named it "Checkers." And you know, the kids, like all kids, love the dog, and I just want to say this, right now, that regardless of what they say about it, we're gonna keep it.48

Nixon successfully paints a picture of a family under attack, particularly in light of the setting of the speech, a typical American home. Instead of a consideration of financial impropriety, the audience is asked to conger images of young girls enjoying the warm affection provided by the family dog, a pet that functions within imaginings of the

suburban landscape. Within the frame of this anecdote, Nixon is able to establish himself not only as the average family man, but as one that places the needs of his family above his own professional goals. The televisual narrative became one of a family under siege, vulnerable to an unnamed force that would try to remove the dog from the loving embrace of a six-year old girl. Nixon’s refusal to back down from this imagined violence on the sanctity of his home makes him an asset to Eisenhower, and the nation, not a liability.

Within a few sentences of this verbal line in the sand, Nixon turns his attention to his opponent, contrasting his own working class status to that of the moneyed Stevenson, “I believe that it’s fine that a man like Governor Stevenson, who inherited a fortune from his father, can run for President. But I also feel that it is essential in this country of ours that a man of modest means can also run for President, because, you know – remember Abraham Lincoln – you remember what he said – ‘God must have loved the common people, he made so many of them.’” Nixon’s remark was not off the mark in terms of Stevenson’s positioning of himself: Stevenson’s grandfather had served as Vice-President under Grover Cleveland, a fact often mentioned in stump speeches. Stevenson’s class status provided fodder for his demasculinization, particularly coupled with his wife’s autonomous role in their divorce. An elite son of a wealthy and powerful family, schooled at Princeton and Harvard Universities, Stevenson became the symbol of effete intellectualism. The perception that he had done nothing to earn his status as a public figure or a leader spoke directly to the populism that the Republicans were working so diligently to cultivate.

49 Ibid.
Though Nixon was not the candidate for the presidency, his role as a representative of the domestic ideal was intrinsic to the campaign. Nixon occupied the gendered space of husband and father that neither Stevenson (due to divorce) nor Eisenhower (due to age) could. Nixon was able to leverage the exalted status of the home not only to elevate his own status as a common man, but as a method to evade questions about financial impropriety. Much like the average American man was expected to directly participate in the Cold War through civil defense maneuvers, Nixon positioned his wife and daughters as objects that require his manly protection from external forces that would disrupt their domestic tranquility, be it through the removal of the family dog or a by an (imagined) critique of his wife’s outerwear. “Nixon wanted his speech to be not just an emotional and sentimental self-defense based upon his love of wife and family, but a projection of himself as a red-blooded American male on the warpath.”

Craftily staged in a representation of the home, the Checkers speech led that warpath right through the domestic sphere, easily deflecting the initial accusations of financial impropriety that prompted its delivery in the first place.

Stevenson could not demonstrate his masculine power as the patriarchal leader of his nuclear family, nor could he prove his manly worth within the confines of his profession. Images of the attorney and statesman at work evoked parallels with the “organization man” that so troubled the thought leaders of the time. He lacked the military accomplishments of General Eisenhower, as well as the physicality. Stevenson boasted no experience as a football player or boxer, and his identity as an intellectual effectively worked to marginalize him further. In fact, Richard Nixon is credited with

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first referring to Stevenson as an “egghead,” a jab not only at his baldness but also at his intellectual tendencies.⁵¹ Adlai Stevenson’s 1952 campaign did not shy away from the perception of himself as an intellectual, one who could think his way around conflict to avoid the aggression and violence of war. One of the few 30-second spots produced by the campaign explicitly made the comparison between the Democratic and Republican candidates. A young woman gazes into the camera, and sings the following lyrics to the tune of the Christmas carol, “O Tannenbaum”:

Vote Stevenson, Vote Stevenson  
A man you can believe in, son.  
From Illinois, whence Lincoln came  
His leadership has won him fame  
A soldier man is always found  
To think in terms of battlegrounds  
But Stevenson—Civilian, son—Will lead us till the peace is won.⁵²

The “soldier man’s” vision is limited by his experience steeped in violence and aggression. In 1952, as the nation clamored for a solution to the war in Korea, Stevenson’s campaign worked to make Eisenhower’s military experience a liability instead of an asset: the Republican would only be able to think of military solutions and their resulting loss of life, while Stevenson would “lead us till the peace is won.” His status as a civilian, according to this line of reasoning, granted him the intellectual flexibility to think about non-military solutions. Political scientists at the time critiqued Stevenson’s efforts to pivot Eisenhower’s military experience as a weakness, calling it a “failure to remove from Eisenhower the halo of a war hero.”⁵³

While Stevenson’s supporters would have considered his status as a statesman and an orator an asset, others would consider a disadvantage. He was accused of using large words that were not accessible to the average Americans. In a profile from *Time* Magazine, the question was posed “Was he making any sense—or talking over people’s heads? Correspondents began to report a frequent phenomenon: the listener who thought Stevenson was probably too abstruse for most people.” Stevenson’s speeches often went over time, with radio and television broadcasts cut off before they were finished. As a populist communication tool, they served to further push the candidate away from the electorate. He lacked the common touch of Eisenhower and Nixon, who relied on tropes of home and hearth to make their case to the American people.

The perception of Stevenson as an intellectual with loft vocabulary set apart from the average citizen undermined his masculinity and by extension his campaign. Cultural historian Aaron Licklider notes that the 1950s was an era marked by fascination with human intelligence, with “overly smart Americans treated as objects of envy, intrigue and celebration within popular culture.” From Robert Oppenheimer and the scientists of the Manhattan Project to the national obsession with quiz show sensation Charles Van Doren, there was an interest in but also suspicion of those who appeared too smart for their own good. Stevenson, with his elite education from prep school to law school, seemed to embody all of the trappings of the egghead, both physically and culturally. Licklider’s analysis establishes the framework to view the burden Stevenson faced when termed “an egghead”:

Though the egghead was generally represented as white and male, he was not the unequivocal heir to the social privilege these categories represented in 1950s America: at a time when conformity was demanded of Americans,

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54 “Whose Adlai?” *Time* 60.18 (1952): 32.
especially if they hoped to achieve their dreams of social empowerment, representations of the egghead often characterized him as queer. A letter to the editor following Newsweek’s profile of the egghead stated unequivocally that he “is a political, economic, and sociological queer.” The collapsing of different forms of “queerness” into the egghead – liberal, communist, and homosexual – guaranteed that the egghead would remain always on the margins of American political, economic, and social discourse.

In this miasma of Cold War conformity and the supposed crisis of masculinity, perceptions of Stevenson’s intelligence troubled his claims on the presidency. As noted in Richard Hofstader’s canonical work, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963), the Democratic candidate was against an underlying opposition to expressions of intelligence that seemed entrenched in Stevenson’s campaign. Hofstader would argue that there was very little that Adlai Stevenson could do to counter these accusations: “He was only a gentleman with an Ivy League background, and there was nothing in his career to spare him from the reverberations of this history set up in the darker corners of the American mind.” These “darker corners of the American mind” were the site of the conflation of the egghead identity with queerness.

If television provided Stevenson an opportunity to make himself more familiar, less “queer,” to voters, he neglected that opportunity. Stevenson’s absence from his own campaign advertisements contributed to the perception of his elitism; it seemed as though he would not deign to appear in something as sordid as a television commercial. While the image and voice of Eisenhower entered the American home via television and spoke about the real, day-to-day concerns of the voters, Stevenson remained aloof, allowing others to extol his candidacy. Ike adapted a fatherly presence in his spots, speaking sternly about solutions and kindly about the challenges faced by the average citizen.

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Through the “Eisenhower Answers America” campaign, he was able to access multiple masculine identities, not only as the warrior leader but also the beneficent patriarch. Adlai Stevenson could call on none of these tropes in support of his candidacy.

Stevenson had another challenge to overcome in the defense of his masculinity (and therefore his eligibility for the presidency): he served as a character witness in 1949 for accused communist Alger Hiss. Stevenson and Hiss worked together in 1933 in the Agriculture Department, and Stevenson filed an affidavit in his trial in 1950. The story is well-known in the history of the second red scare: Self-professed communist and homosexual Whitaker Chambers testified in front of the House Committee on Un-American Activities against Hiss, by now a high-ranking official with the State Department. Chambers claimed Hiss passed documents to the Soviets, as well as other sensitive materials. Due to a statue of limitation, charges of espionage could not be brought against Hiss, who was instead charged and convicted of perjury. Hiss denied any criminal activity, and instead claimed that Chambers was acting vindictively because he’d spurned the man’s sexual advances. Speculation swirled about the true relationship between Hiss and Chambers, though nothing was ever proved conclusively.  

Nonetheless, his solidarity with Hiss was constantly used as a weapon against him in the campaign of 1952. Senator Joe McCarthy, infamous communist chaser, frequently made the intentional interchange of the men’s names, “Alger…I mean Adlai.” Richard Nixon, who had made a name for himself as the most dogged pursuer of Hiss as a member of HUAC, often lobbed attacks. Just two weeks before the 1952 election, Nixon was featured in a national broadcast condemning Stevenson for his affiliation with Hiss:

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"His actions, his statements, his record disqualify him from leading . . . the fight against Communism at home and abroad."

Hiss and Stevenson’s shared class status also contributed to his characterization as an elitist. Both from affluent, educated backgrounds, both alumni of Harvard Law School, the men were perceived as genteel bureaucrats. Instead of the military prowess of Eisenhower or the hardscrabble financial background of Nixon, Stevenson again was presented as a member of the cultural elite, removed from the realities of the American experience, more loyal to a shared background than the needs of the nation.

Adlai Stevenson’s persona offered up a trifecta of questionable heterosexuality: divorced, intellectual, and affiliated with a known communist sympathizer and possible homosexual. Dismissed as an affiliate of the loathsome homosexual Alger Hiss, impugned as an egghead, and mocked for his inability to control his wife and home, the Stevenson campaign waged an effort to establish a masculine, heterosexual identity for their candidate. While it could be argued that scholars like Hofstadter, Dean, Johnson, and Cuordlione have already addressed the cultural demasculinization of Adlai Stevenson, Stevenson’s active resistance to this characterization has not been addressed at all. In particular, scholars have neglected the Stevenson campaign’s efforts to instead cast Eisenhower as the weakened, possibly homosexual, candidate.

**Round One: Adoring Adlai and Queering Ike**

A common trope used to demonstrate male virility and heterosexuality was deployed by the Democrats in 1952: beautiful women were featured as desiring Stevenson. As previously noted, Stevenson did not appear in his own campaign films and
commercials in the 1952 election, Instead, the Stevenson campaign featured surrogates, including a large number of women addressing why they chose to vote for the Democrat. One such spot, titled, “I Love the Gov” provides an example of how the campaign sought to buttress a heterosexual identity for Stevenson. In the 30-second advertisement, an attractive young women wearing a low-cut evening gown stares directly into the camera and begins signing to an upbeat tune provided by a piano accompaniment:

TEXT: "I LOVE THE GOV."

WOMAN (singing):
I'd rather have a man with a hole in his shoe
Than a hole in everything he says.
I'd rather have a man who knows what to do
When he gets to be the Prez.
I love the Gov', the Governor of Illinois.
He is the guy that brings the dove of peace and joy.
When Illinois the GOP double-crossed,
He is the one who told all the crooks, "Get lost."
Adlai, love you madly,
And what you did for your own great state,
You're gonna do for the rest of the 48.
Didn't know much about him before he came,
But now my heart's a ballot that bears his name.
'Cause listen to what he has to say,
I know that on Election Day,
We're gonna choose the Gov' that we love.
He is the Gov' nobody can shove.
We'll make the Gov' president of the you, the me and the U.S.A.58

This spot, with the visual and verbal representation of a woman that finds Adlai Stevenson to be sexually attractive, works to stave off accusations of effeminacy and homosexuality. Though she briefly alludes to policy actions that Stevenson took as chief executive of Illinois, the overall content of the song conveys an amorous love that moves beyond respect for an elected official. Noting that her “heart is a ballot that bears his

name,” the singer is investing the candidate with the desirable masculine identity as an object of female desire. Her ode also claims that Stevenson is “the Gov’ nobody can shove”; though some latitude may be given to the songwriter’s efforts to keep the rhythmic continuity of the song, the physicality of this line evokes notions of a defensive stance. The Stevenson campaign actively attempted to demonstrate the virility and physical vigor or their candidate. These efforts to establish Stevenson as the object of female desire was not lost in the popular discourse, as noted in an August 1952 Time magazine article: “When the Democratic Convention nominated Adlai Stevenson for President, it gave him another position: he became the most eligible unmarried man in the U.S.”

The visual image presented an appealing woman extolling the virtue of the candidate, as well as her physical longing for him.

In addition to trying to forge a strong heterosexual identity for their candidate, the Stevenson campaign also lobbed not-so-subtle innuendo at Eisenhower. Several spots titled in the “Ike?...Bob?” series cast Eisenhower and Senator Robert Taft as lovers. Robert Taft had been Eisenhower’s chief rival for the Republican nomination, and party leadership was initially concerned about whether or not Taft would throw support behind Eisenhower. Such an accord was reached in September 12, 1952 at the nominee’s campaign headquarters in New York City. Dubbed the “Surrender at Morningside Heights” by liberal Republicans, Eisenhower agreed to pursue many of Taft’s conservative financial goals and Taft agreed to actively campaign for Eisenhower. The Democrats seized on this opportunity to question Eisenhower’s role as a leader among Republicans. In one of Stevenson’s few spot advertisements, the visual features lacy

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60 Though Taft was popular, Eisenhower chose Nixon his running mate, largely because of his fame gained as a result of the Hiss case.
cartoon valentines bearing the men’s names, pierced by Cupid’s arrow. The voice-over includes two male voices: Voice #1 was presented as very high and feminine, while Voice #2 was masculine and commanding. The men declare strong feelings for one another, an inference articulated as one of homosexual love:

MALE VOICE #1: Ike.
MALE VOICE #2: Bob.
MALE VOICE #1: Ike.
MALE VOICE #2: Bob. I'm so glad we're friends again, Bob.
MALE VOICE #1: Yes, Ike, we agree on everything.
MALE VOICE #2: Let's never separate again, Bob.
MALE VOICE #1: Never again, Ike.
MALE VOICE #2: Bob.
MALE VOICE #1: Ike.
MALE VOICE #2: Bob.
MALE VOICE #1: Ike.

MALE NARRATOR: Will Ike and Bob really live happily ever after? Is the White House big enough for both of them? Stay tuned for a musical interlude.

(Piano music)

MALE VOICE #3 (singing):
Rueben, Rueben, I've been thinkin'
Bob and Ike now think alike—
With the Gen'ral in the White House
Who'd give the orders, Bob or Ike?
Let's vote for Adlai--and John!

Another such spot features the same illustration of the two hearts pierced by Cupid’s arrow, as well as the same juxtaposition of the masculine and feminine voices.

MALE VOICE #1: Ike.
MALE VOICE #2: Bob.
MALE VOICE #1: Ike.
MALE VOICE #2: Bob.
MALE VOICE #1: I'm for labor, Ike.
MALE VOICE #2: I know you are, Bob. And I’m for labor, too.
MALE VOICE #1: That’s why we must enforce the Taft-Hartley bill, Ike.
MALE VOICE #2: If you say so, Bob.
MALE VOICE #1: Ike.
MALE VOICE #2: Bob.
MALE VOICE #1: Ike.
MALE VOICE #2: Bob.

MALE NARRATOR: Do Ike and Bob really love labor? Should labor really love Ike and Bob? Stay tuned for a musical interlude.

Rueben, Rueben, I've been thinkin'
You have got a steady job—
But will you be working steady
If we elect Ike and Bob?
Let's vote for Adlai--and John!

The “musical interlude” featured in both sets of the above lyrics is set to the tune of the American folksong “Reuben and Rachel.” The original song is a gleeful discussion of gender politics, sung by a male and female lead. Though this song may have since subsided from contemporary popular American culture, the original lyrics provide a productive frame to consider how the viewing audience of 1952 might have considered its use in this spot. A portion of the original lyrics are excerpted below:

Reuben, I have long been thinking, what a good world this might be,
If the men were all transported far beyond the Northern Sea.

Rachel, I have long been thinking, what a fine world this might be,
If we had some more young ladies on this side the Northern Sea.

Reuben, now do stop your teasing, if you've any love for me.
I was only just a-fooling, as I thought of course you'd see.
Rachel, I will not transport you, but will take you for a wife.
We will live on milk and honey, better or worse, we're in for life.  

Listeners in 1952 would have been familiar with the original lyrics of the song, with its culmination of harmony and romantic love between the two singers. Within this frame, it is not difficult to see that the Stevenson campaign is painting Eisenhower in the role of the woman, the inferior to Taft’s true masculine leadership. The implication of a

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romantic, assumedly sexual relationship between the two men can only be read as a smear within the cultural confines of 1952, an era when homosexuality was a moral as well as a medical disorder that had been categorized as a threat to national security. The emphasis on a homosexual, physical relationship makes this spot all the more compelling. Television, a media format consumed in the domestic space of the home, and consumed with the fictional representation of domestic concerns, rarely if ever spoke about the physical act of sex in any capacity. This was a time when the word “pregnant” could not be uttered, and heterosexual married couples were depicted as sleeping in separate beds. Thusly the inference of a physical relationship would be all the more arresting to viewers.

The “Surrender at Morningside Heights” provided considerable fodder for Democrats. The agreement between two former rivals would seem to be commonplace politics, yet the Stevenson campaign imbued it with a particularly gendered and sexualized meaning. These implications are on vivid display in the campaign film, “The Stevenson Bandwagon.” Deploying the familiar trope of the celebrity endorsement, Mercedes McCambridge, radio actress turned Academy Award winner for her role in 1949’s All the King’s Men, served as the hostess for the paid program, though she did not appear in the narrative. One of the segments, introduced as “Sing a Song O’ Stevenson,” featured another little ditty as a possible campaign song for the Eisenhower campaign. It is another example of an overt attempt to feminize Dwight Eisenhower, seen in the reworking of the classic 1892 American song, "Daisy Bell (Bicycle Built for Two).”

General, General, give us your answer, do.  
We’re all crazy, just for the love of you.  
But you know with your supporters, Bob Taft would give the orders  
And would you look sweet, upon the seat,  
In a White House that’s built for two.
The same actress that sang “I Luv the Guv” performs again, this time perched upon a piano. The first two lines are sung with a relatively expressionless face, yet she begins to lift her eyebrows in skepticism at the third line. Again, the theme that Eisenhower would be a mere figurehead emerges, with the claim that Taft would be the true leader of the party and the decision maker in the White House. The challenges to the Republican candidate’s masculinity are not subtle or incidental. While the main argument against Eisenhower would be his supposed subservience to Robert Taft, it is clearly a gendered critique, intended to marginalize not only Eisenhower’s leadership status within the party but his identity as a gender-normative individual. The visual evoked of the five-star general looking “sweet,” clearly feminizes him, placing him under the sexualized gaze of his would-be partner Taft. When presented with the song as an option, the actor portraying the boss at Republican Headquarters who is supposed to be considering the jingle for use in his own campaign proclaims, “We don’t want to use that. It admits too much.”

For all of the accusations of Stevenson’s high-mindedness, his campaign engaged in the same kind of gendered aspersions as those the Democrats supposedly measured themselves against. While the attacks on Eisenhower’s masculinity were couched in ridiculous songs embedded in an ineffective format, the narrative cannot be ignored. A man who could not was not only feminized, “looking sweet,” but a homosexual man who would take the subordinate position in a sexual relationship. For the Democrats, as much as the Republicans, feminizing the opponent was part of “talking sense to the American people.” In spite of Stevenson’s clumsy efforts to cast Eisenhower as the feminized candidate, Eisenhower soundly defeated Stevenson in the Electoral College and took 55% of the popular vote.
While Stevenson had tried to paint Eisenhower as a puppet incapable of rising to the masculine needs of a state battling communism and its attendant homosexuality, the General’s policy choices after election could actively refute any accusation that the Republican sought to subvert the dominant gender paradigm. In 1953, Eisenhower signed the document that would codify the government’s right to punitive labor action in cases of suspected homosexuality. Citing national security interests, the president signed Executive Order 10450 on April 27, 1953, which stated “all persons privileged to be employed in the departments and agencies of the Government, shall be reliable, trustworthy, of good conduct and character, and of complete and unswerving loyalty to the United States.” While this may seem non-controversial in light of the perception of widespread espionage at the peak of the Cold War, the document explicitly defines the characteristics under which a federal employee should be dismissed, including “Any criminal, infamous, dishonest, immoral, or notoriously disgraceful conduct, habitual use of intoxicants to excess, drug addiction, sexual perversion.” Though no particular acts or identification of what construes sexual perversion is detailed, it was widely understood that this veiled language was a euphemism for homosexuality. While previously the military and State Department had undergone purges of employees identified as homosexual, Executive Order 10450 granted this authority to all agencies of the federal government. When asked to explain this policy to the American people, Eisenhower explained at a press conference, “We are talking security risks: if a man has done certain things that, you know, make him, well, a security risk in delicate positions—I don’t care what they are—where he is subject to a bit of blackmail or weakness.” Though the General claimed not to care what the act itself was that could potentially compromise the

62 Quoted in The Lavender Scare, pg. 123.
integrity of the employee, there was no revelation of the “perversions” of heterosexual employees.

In the 1954 State of the Union address, Eisenhower revealed that 2,200 employees had been “separated” from the federal government under the new security program. Though he did not quantify which percentage of these employees were terminated for perversion and which were dismissed for other acts of subversion, the president expressed a commitment to the exclusionary practice: “Our national security demands that the investigation of new employees and the evaluation of derogatory information respecting present employees be expedited and concluded at the earliest possible date. I shall recommend that the Congress provide additional funds where necessary to speed these important procedures.”63 It is significant that a man who campaigned against wasteful government spending and advocated for a balanced national budget (that would ostensibly operate under the same framework as a balanced family budget, according to the rhetoric of his campaign) would prioritize federal funding for the investigation of the private lives of federal employees. This spending was viewed instead as an investment for the future, a future that envisioned the absence of those outside of the normative gendered framework.

The impact of Executive Order 10450 extended far beyond the federal government and the thousands of employees that were persecuted. Homosexuality and atypical gender performance were now officially worthy of punitive action, thus actually creating the possibilities for blackmail that the administration was purportedly so concerned with. Identification as queer now yielded more than social stigma, it could

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result in significant economic repercussions, yielding the vulnerability that was allegedly
the reason that homosexuality created a national security risk. Eisenhower’s policy
actually contributed to the condition he was trying to avoid. Further, if the federal
government could legally exclude those identified as homosexuals, there was little to
compel private industry to have inclusive hiring practices. With policies that explicitly
punished those even accused of homosexuality, it is little wonder that individuals chose
to remain closeted, a reality that has far-reaching social and societal implications that
continue to surface. It took forty-five years to finally revoke the legal damage done by
Executive Order 10450. In 1998, President Bill Clinton signed Executive Order 13087,
establishing “a uniform policy for the Federal government to prohibit discrimination
based on sexual orientation.”

As the Democratic candidate speculated at the time, a Republican victory was
likely more a referendum on the last five terms of Democratic power than a reflection of
the public’s dislike of one particular man. Leading up to the 1956 election, Eisenhower
understood well the power of television broadcasting, particularly its persuasive
emotional power. In a nationally televised speech to the National Association of Radio
and Television Broadcasters on May 24, 1955, President Eisenhower praised the
audience while simultaneously declaring his understanding of the medium as a strategic
device: “You put an appealing voice or an engaging personality in the living room of the
home where there are impressionable people from the age of understanding on up.”

When the next election cycle ramped up, Stevenson was more enthusiastic and
optimistic about his chances at victory, particularly in light of Eisenhower’s perceived
weakness in light of his 1955 heart attack and June 1956 ileitis surgery. This leader who
had leveraged a history of physical prowess and military acumen into the presidency spent months of his term as a bedridden weakling, and Adlai Stevenson was determined to make Ike’s health part of the conversation.

**Round Two: Dueling Masculinities in the Election of 1956**

If aspersions against Stevenson’s masculinity were veiled in 1952, they emerged in a much more blatant manner by 1956. Not only were political opponents like Joseph McCarthy and Richard Nixon referring to Adlai Stevenson’s allegedly questionable sexuality, now the mass media was more explicit in its allegations. Sensationalist tabloid magazines like *Confidential* ran quotes out of context from his ex-wife Ellen Borden with headlines like “How that Stevenson Rumor Started” and “The Whispers Adlai Stevenson Couldn’t Stop!” *The New York Daily News* published a column deriding him as “Adeline” by the *New York News*, replete with a “fruity” voice. 64 Conservative newspaper columnist Walter Winchell proclaimed, “A vote for Adlai Stevenson is a vote for Christine Jorgensen,” a reference to the first well-known male to female transsexual.

Though Stevenson’s televiral campaign tactics had improved some since the last election, the attacks on Eisenhower’s masculinity were still present within the new film materials. However, the undermining of Ike’s masculinity was no longer related to his sexuality or submissiveness; instead, Stevenson’s attacks were lodged in an investment in manly physical strength and corporeal vitality. In the intervening years between the elections, President Eisenhower suffered a series of health setbacks, including a major heart attack, a minor stroke and an attack of ileitis requiring surgical intervention.

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Following the heart attack in September 1955 the nation watched and waited to see not only if he would recover, but if he would run for re-election. Recognizing the weakness in their opponent, as well as the risk of seeming opportunistic in the midst of a national crisis, Democratic campaign staff avoided discussing the president’s health (and by extension the viability of Eisenhower’s campaign) until almost immediately before the November 1956 election. When the campaign made this decision to go on the offensive, the Stevenson campaign used a language of gendered weakness to undermine Eisenhower’s suitability for office.

By 1956, the campaign was more fluent in the methodology of television. Longer campaign films were still produced, but so were shorter spots that mimicked some of the techniques of “Eisenhower Answers America.” Stevenson was still reluctant to participate in television advertising, indicting Eisenhower campaign tactics in his 1956 nomination acceptance speech, “The men who run the Eisenhower administration evidently believe that the minds of Americans can be manipulated by shows, slogans and the arts of advertising. And that conviction will, I dare say, be backed up by the greatest torrent of money ever poured out to influence an American election—poured out by men who fear nothing so much as change and who want everything to stay as it is—only more so. This idea that you can merchandise candidates for high office like breakfast cereal—that you can gather votes like box tops—is, I think, the ultimate indignity to the democratic process.” In spite of his resistance, Stevenson did participate in the production of the films this time around, taking an active role in presenting himself as a

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65 Clarence G. Lasby’s Eisenhower’s Heart Attack: How Ike beat heart disease and held on to the presidency (1997) provides an almost moment-by-moment description of the event itself, but also details the way that the administration and campaign staff rallied to deal with the press to deflect speculation about Eisenhower’s electability.

man of the people, similar to voters across the nation.

Recognizing the success of Ike’s “The Man from Abilene” spot, the Democrats lifted it wholesale for their own man, dubbing him “The Man from Libertyville.” Several long films were produced that presented “The Stevenson Story,” detailing the long history of the Stevenson family in Illinois, replete with images of rolling hills and shops on Main Street. Adlai Stevenson carried the baggage of his domestic situation into his next campaign. He had not remarried, and a cultural investment in the domestic sphere still ran high. An October 1956 Time Magazine man-on-the-street critique of Adlai Stevenson’s marital status as the first divorced candidate was particularly blunt about the matter: “If a man can’t run his family he has no business trying to run the country.”67 However, this time around, the campaign made more strategic choices about how to integrate their candidate into the family landscape. Instead of using Stevenson’s sister (identified as “Mrs. Ives”) as a substitute for the would-be first lady, reporting that she always knew her brother was meant for greatness, the 1956 campaign sought to make the most of Stevenson’s grown sons, effectively allowing the candidate to appropriate some of the symbolic masculine leadership invested in the husband and father.68 One of the “Man from Libertyville” spots features Adlai’s daughter-in-law, heavily pregnant. Images pan from the bucolic setting of the small American town to the Stevenson homestead itself, as the male narrator intones:

ANNOUNCER: The Democratic National Committee presents another visit with the man from Libertyville. Here, at the end of this lane, on a farm about four miles from Libertyville, lives Adlai E. Stevenson of Illinois. But before we look for the Governor, let's see the nearby town of

68 Mrs. Ives remarked on her brother following in the footsteps of all of their forbearers: “I think it’s inevitable that Adlai go into politics. I think it’s his destiny.”68 The Stevenson Story, 1952 campaign film
Libertyville itself. Here is the main street, the shops and the church. Here, in markets like this, is where Nancy Stevenson, the Governor's daughter-in-law, does the family shopping. She drives in several times a week. And because Libertyville is like many other American communities, and because Nancy Stevenson is like so many other young wives, she's learned quite a bit about how much groceries and the like cost these days. After shopping she drives home four miles to Governor Stevenson's farm where she and Adlai, Jr. are staying, until he returns to law school. The Stevensons are returning now from a shopping trip in Libertyville. The Governor is helping with the groceries.

STEVenson: That's my daughter-in-law Nancy and my oldest son, Adlai, Jr. He's a, a student at law school. I think they--they're staying with me during the vacation. I think they live pretty well but they're learning a lot about something that worries a lot of people in this country and that, of course, is the high cost of living, in spite of the Eisenhower promise.

This spot positions Stevenson and his family as average citizens, equally affected by the failed economic policies of Eisenhower’s America, these failed promises undermining the domestic ideal.

This time around, Stevenson worked to establish himself not as an intellectual but instead as a son of an Illinois farmer, with films showing Stevenson and his running mate Estes Kefauver walking through the fields of the Libertyville homestead, reflecting on their experiences as farmers. The Democrat’s slogan this cycle was “The party for you, not just a few.” Populist and patriarchal, Adlai Stevenson worked diligently to position himself in 1956 as all the things he was perceived not to be in 1952.

Yet it would not be enough to merely buttress his own masculinity against popular attack; the Democrats also needed to demonstrate why a choice to reelect Eisenhower would be a risky proposition. The peace and relative economic prosperity of the era provided little in the way of criticism of the current administration. Eisenhower had lived up to his promise to end the fighting in Korea, and much of the Red Scare perpetuated by
HUAC had subsided by 1956. Eisenhower’s physical weakness provided one of the few avenues to effectively position voters against the incumbent president.

The choice to pursue vocal criticism of Eisenhower’s ability to serve was fraught with challenges. Immediately following announcement of the heart attack, Stevenson demurred from comment. Stevenson did not need to make an explicit attack on his opponent’s condition in the first days following the heart attack. Though the mass media at the time was kept at bay by the trappings of the presidency, including the Secret Service, Eisenhower’s staff made regular reports on his condition. These reports were certainly mediated, crafted to create the least damaging representation of his medical status as possible. However, these discussions of the general’s body made public personal details of his physical status, from his bowel movements to his sleep patterns. Expert cardiologists gave testimony on the presidents’ status over the six weeks that he was hospitalized in Denver, and speculation on Ike’s health continued long after his release and return to the White House.

Stevenson made his first mention of the heart attack in a Harrisburg, Pennsylvania stump speech on September 13, 1956. However, he slightly tempered the connection between Ike’s health and his incompetence:

The Eisenhower administration instead is irresistibly attracted to the rose-colored glasses, which cast an unreal and a dangerously perceptive film over an insecure peace, and an increasing threat to man's freedom... It develops from Mr. Eisenhower's peculiar concept of the president's role--his inclination to be umpire rather than participant, the consistency with which he has appeared as a passive, detached, negative chief executive. His acceptance of this part-time presidential role was shown repeatedly, in both utterances and his actions, long before his heart attack and his ileitis operation added complicating factors.

Stevenson understood that the status of Eisenhower’s health was relevant to voters not
only because of whether or not he would live long enough to fulfill his term of office, but because his corporeal weakness was conflated with a diminishment of his masculinity, a yielding of power to external authorities. Foucault’s work illustrates the power of the medical complex in erasing personal agency, granting power to the physicians and others who would wield discretionary control. Instead of leading, Eisenhower would be following, from a prescribed diet to an exercise regime. This formerly physically robust leader was reduced to the status of bedridden invalid, an image that flies in the face of masculine gender performance that requires physical strength, power and vitality.

Reactions to illness are particularly gendered, both on the part of the patient and others. Women facing illness are "culturally prepared for powerlessness," while men are challenged not only physically but with external expectations about their identity. Social constructions of masculinity do not allow for weakness, physical or emotional, and this holds true particularly for those men in the highest seats of power. It has been argued that the cornerstone of masculine dominance rests in the ability to be physically dominant. This reality is so intrinsic to gender dynamics that “the systematic subordination of women and lower-status men or patriarchy is made possible, in part, through these gendered demonstrations of health and health behavior. In this way, males use health beliefs and behaviors to demonstrate dominant and hegemonic masculine ideals that clearly establish them as men.” Eisenhower’s inability to make these performances of appropriately gendered masculinity made his candidacy vulnerable.

If the Democrat only alluded to Eisenhower’s physical weakness before, he did

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not mince his words on election eve. Stevenson was falling behind in the polls as Eisenhower dealt with two major international crises that happened just days before Election Day: the Soviet invasion of Hungary and the Suez Canal crisis. Sensing perhaps one lingering liability in the incumbent’s campaign, Stevenson played his trump card. At a rally in Boston, Massachusetts, Adlai Stevenson made his case to the American people. After about 1,500 words on why he would be the best candidate for the job, Stevenson made his final salvo against Eisenhower, a direct attack on the physical strength and vitality of the sitting president:

    And now one other matter. Your choice tomorrow will not be of a president for tomorrow. It will be of the man—or men—who will serve you as president for the next four years.

    And distasteful as this matter is, I must say bluntly that every piece of scientific evidence we have, every lesson of history and experience, indicates that a Republican victory tomorrow would mean that Richard M. Nixon would probably be president of this country within the next four years. I say frankly, as a citizen more than a candidate, that I recoil at the prospect of Mr. Nixon as custodian of this nation's future, as guardian of the hydrogen bomb, as representative of America in the world, as Commander-in-Chief of the United States Armed Forces.

Clearly an indictment of Nixon as well as Eisenhower personally, the remarks were implicitly an attack on the president’s manhood and physical power. Eisenhower was not man enough to complete the task at hand, instead, two men were required.

    Stevenson’s attempts to demonstrate his own normative manhood, and to diminish that of Eisenhower, were even less successful in his second campaign than his first. Eisenhower secured a greater landslide victory than he had in their previous contest, winning all but seven states and taking almost 57% of the popular vote. Though some voters expressed hesitation about Eisenhower’s health, his legacy of military leadership won the day, solidifying the 1950s as the Age of Eisenhower.
The Legacy of 1952 and 1956: The Shape of Things to Come

Though the impact of the “Eisenhower Answers America” campaign has been debated among scholars of history, politics and communications, little has been said about its content. While noting that the television advertising campaign far exceeded that of his opponent’s in both strategies and tactics, the lack of political substance seems to have been forgotten in the analysis of the campaign. Eisenhower’s campaign depicted conversations with the American people, not the one-way speeches of his opponent. Though the spot ads may have accomplished exactly what they were intended to do, namely persuade American voters to choose Ike instead of Adlai, it could be argued that the spots created a gendered methodology not only for how to speak to the electorate, but what to say to them. Eisenhower leveraged the intimacy of television to develop a virtual relationship with the voter, speaking to them about domestic concerns within their own domestic space. He effectively occupied the role of the father of the nation, not by exploiting his role as a former military leader, but by establishing his own domestic bona fides as Mamie’s husband, a man concerned with food prices and inflation.

Some have noted that the Eisenhower campaign created a template for the Republican candidates that would follow him. With a folksy demeanor, simplified language and a purported emphasis on domestic concerns, shadows of the Eisenhower campaign have been refigured again and again. “Eisenhower’s anti-intellectual posturing becomes more relevant when we consider the possibility that subsequent presidents may have imitated him…Eisenhower reaped the benefits of exceeding low expectations, thus paving the way for Reagan and Bush to follow in his path.”

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As for Stevenson, though his name would never again appear on a presidential ballot, his memory still rises to the forefront in discussions of candidates with marginalized masculinity. In the presidential campaigns of 2008 and 2012, comparisons were drawn between he and Barack Obama, noting (in spite of race and class differences) both men were egghead intellectuals from Illinois that would have difficulty proving their manhood to the American people. The popular process of questioning presidential candidate’s masculinity is still manifest in contemporary campaign communications, as is the perpetual demand for an easily understandable identity as a husband and father.

Though he would make a failed attempt at the nomination in 1960, Stevenson did lend support to eventual Democratic nominee Senator John F. Kennedy, who had actively supported his 1956 campaign, appearing in several of Stevenson’s campaign films. Always one to appreciate the celebration of his own masculinity (and the diminishment of another’s) it was reported that his favorite moment of the 1960 Los Angeles convention was when one of his supporters, a heavily pregnant woman, strode across the stage holding a large sign that read “STEVENSON IS THE MAN.”

Stevenson’s final role was as United States Ambassador to the United Nations, position that enabled him to make the soaring speeches for which he had suffered so much criticism.

Ironically, Adlai Stevenson would succumb to a massive heart attack in 1965, dying on a London street corner, while Eisenhower spent his final years in passable health, until his final illness left him infirm, convalescing in Walter Reed Army Hospital for eight months before dying in March 1969. In a move critics thought tasteless, Richard Nixon called upon the American people to cheer up the ailing Eisenhower at the 1968 Republican Convention:

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We're going to win for a number of reasons: first a personal one. General Eisenhower, as you know, lies critically ill in the Walter Reed Hospital tonight. I have talked, however, with Mrs. Eisenhower on the telephone. She tells me that his heart is with us. And she says that there is nothing that he lives more for and there is nothing that would lift him more than for us to win in November and I say let's win this one for Ike!  

Eisenhower’s health, a liability in 1956, became a persuasive tool of leverage in 1968. The General’s absence due to poor health is especially relevant, as it is highly doubtful that he would have strongly supported Nixon in this run for office. Instead, Mrs. Eisenhower stands in for her husband, his voice appropriated and his power subverted.

While many scholars of communications cite 1960 as the “first modern campaign” the groundwork laid in the campaigns of the previous decade set the stage for the dramatic showdown between Republicans and Democrats in 1960. The contest between Kennedy and Nixon would also involve much of the masculine symbology seen in the campaigns of the 1950s. Wives and children would be on display, as would tales of military heroism. Physical ailments would be concealed, and television would stand at the forefront of the persuasive process. Both Kennedy and Nixon plumbed the intimate connection between candidate and voter provided by television as each spoke directly to the electorate, pleading their case. The contest between candidates would escalate to face-to-face confrontations in a series of broadcast debates that prompted a discussion of each man’s style, dress and physical attractiveness, raising the political discourse beyond the intimate to that of public spectacle as each man jockeyed to position themselves as the best man for the job.

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It would be difficult to overstate the amount of attention that the life of John Fitzgerald Kennedy has garnered. From scholars to novelists, documentarians to musicians, speculations about everything from his policy choices to his sexual escapades have provided material for discussion across social and academic divides. By extension, this scrutinizing lens has been turned to his family of origin (boasting eight brothers and sisters) and his wife and young children, a small girl and boy that were frequently depicted at play in the White House.

Tales of the 1960 election are myriad, though none take a particularly gendered approach to discussing the contest between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Kennedy’s masculine accomplishments were leveraged from the beginning of his political career, particularly his heroics during World War II as the skipper of the ill-fated PT-109. Nixon had forged his public manhood in the domestic spaces of the nation’s imagination, as a vocal defender of his wife and children in the 1952 Checkers speech, and then in a head-to-head conflict with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev during the 1959 “Kitchen Debate.” Thus while both men had the trappings of both masculinity and heterosexuality required for a potentially successful candidacy, Kennedy faced more obstacles to election, particularly those founded in his religion and his relative youth. Opposition to Kennedy’s Catholicism and accusations of his inexperience were generally couched in terms that questioned Kennedy’s autonomy, particularly in terms of his ability to make independent decisions, a requisite for masculine identity. Kennedy’s biography also included some of the personal characteristics that served to undermine his
predecessor’s masculinity. Like Adlai Stevenson, he could have been pegged as a wealthy intellectual, with the publication of two books under his belt, *Why England Slept* (1940) and the 1956 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Profiles in Courage*. Or like Eisenhower, he might have been saddled with the stigma of ill health, including a well-known period of convalescence resulting from two back surgeries during his first Senate term and a discussion of his diagnosis of Addison’s disease at the 1960 Democratic National Convention. Yet Kennedy was perceived as the ultimate symbol of virility and physical vigor. In 1959, conservative political columnist for the *Washington Post* Joseph Alsop called the Democrat a solution to the party’s previous failures, a “Stevenson with balls.”

Though John F. Kennedy is now widely considered to be a stereotypically masculine figure in American politics, the initial challenges to his candidacy were particularly gendered, questioning his ability to make independent decisions as an autonomous figure. Autonomy is a requisite for the performance of masculinity. "According to essentialist ideologies, the construction of male gender requires one's molding into a masculine role, which presupposes autonomy, competition, and aggressiveness." As a candidate for president, a clearly articulated sense of autonomy would have been particularly important in Cold War America; a leader should not be vulnerable to the influence of pervasive ideologies, be it insidious communism of the collectivist ethics illustrated in William Whyte’s influential book *The Organization Man* (1956), which claimed a decline in individualism and a move toward conformity. As Freidman notes in her analysis on autonomy and politics, “What matters for autonomy, then, is that someone has a certain distinctive stance, the stance of cares, concerns, and

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commitments that comprise a self-reflective, practical perspective.”77 As can be seen in the investment in children demonstrated in his campaign communications, Kennedy was able to carve out his autonomy through this “stance of cares” explicitly linked to his own fatherhood and identification with a patriarchal role apart from that of his own father.

The concept of personal autonomy was of particular concern at the cusp of the 1960s, as the perceived crisis of masculinity percolated to the surface of popular discourse in the writings of Arthur Schlesinger and others. Autonomy is typically understood as having the ability “to act within a framework of rules one sets for oneself; that is, it to have a kind of authority over oneself as well as the power to act on that authority…to describe a person as autonomous is to claim that the person is self-directed in this way.”78 Personal autonomy, the ability to make decisions free of influence from others, has always been a gendered condition lodged in masculinist ideology, a defining characteristic of what it means to be an adult man. Without this marker, a male identity is subverted. Feminist political theorists Jane Mansbridge and Susan Moller Okin have argued that correcting women’s lack of autonomy is one of the key goals of feminism, a necessity to reach gender equality. Their articulation of autonomy is useful in a consideration of Kennedy’s campaign communication:

If the self is a constructed, changing entity which is identifiable as a subject and author of its own narrative only by living in it and with it, autonomy cannot be gained simply by shedding adverse socialization. Autonomy must not be a state, but a practice, embedded in existing power relations.79

Their assessment illustrates why Kennedy needed to demonstrate his own autonomy as part of a fully realized, “self-directed” personhood, not “other-directed” (in the words of David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd*) not a pawn of his powerful father or his hierarchical church. Under the demands of the campaign, Kennedy had to prove to the American public that he had done more than “shed the adverse socialization” he might have been exposed to as a privileged scion of a wealthy businessman and diplomat. His ability to navigate existing power relations needed to be clearly evidenced, showing him as independent and under his own auspices. Otherwise, these aspects of his biography would feminize him in the eyes of a nation questioning the changes in the landscape of American masculinity, undermining his claims to executive office.

Kennedy’s wartime military service also earned him a claim on autonomy, and by extension masculinity. The linkage between militarism and masculinity has been addressed by scholars and theorists, but a simple articulation can be found in Higate’s *Military Masculinities: Identities and the State*: “The armed forces continue to represent the exemplar masculinist institution in terms of their dominant values and gendered division of labor. These models of masculinity extend beyond the military and tend to shape hegemonic ideologies of what it is to be a man thought many aspects of life.”

Of course, Kennedy did not just serve in the military, he excelled, garnering distinction as the hero who rescued his fellow men. In an era when conformity and sameness was considered the death-knell of American masculinity, Kennedy was able to work within the sameness of military culture and make a name for himself amongst the hundreds of thousands of other Americans that fought during the era. Kennedy’s success in the

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military allowed him to stave off aspersions against his masculinity, and because of the alignment of the two, his autonomy.

Kennedy’s heroism was not the only asset he displayed to demonstrate his autonomy and masculinity. His visible procreativity, as well as his possession of a physically desirable wife, successfully served to dispel accusations of otherwise feminizing physical weakness and overly cerebral proclivities. Implicit and explicit representations of fatherhood in Kennedy and Nixon’s television campaign commercials, as well as material from stump speeches and the historically significant televised debates of 1960, establish an investment in traditional gender roles and a normative masculinity.

While much has been made of the role of visual communications in swaying voters to choose Kennedy over Nixon, the campaign deployed more subtle gendered politics than simply that of a beauty contest. Importantly, Kennedy anchored much of his campaign rhetoric in the potential rescue of children, both at home and abroad. Television commercials featured copious images of his wife and young daughter, and Jacqueline Kennedy even wrote a series of newspaper columns in support of her husband’s campaign and detailing her ongoing pregnancy, the contributions bluntly titled *Campaign Wife*, that reminded readers of Kennedy’s domestic role as not only a doting but virile father, his wife’s pregnancy providing visible evidence of his ample fertility. Kennedy’s investment in the role of patriarch helped assuage fears of difference in his identity not only as a Roman Catholic, but also as a privileged intellectual.

This chapter will discuss the mechanisms the Kennedy campaign used to navigate around challenges to Kennedy’s personal autonomy through an emphasis on Kennedy’s masculine identity as a father, both literally and metaphorically, and a war hero. To
defuse accusations of Kennedy as nothing more than the son of a wealthy and powerful man, the campaign infused their visual communications with images of the senator as loving father to two-year old daughter Caroline. To establish his role as an autonomous and independent decision-maker, mitigating perceptions that Kennedy would be a pawn to the Catholic Church, the candidate evoked the separation of church and state clause of the Constitution, and refused to support items on his church’s agenda, including support of parochial schools and the development of an ambassadorship to the Vatican. In order to create a wholly independent identity for himself, Kennedy used those elements of his autobiography that were deemed most masculine to neutralize aspects of his background that were considered liabilities.

The War Hero: Kennedy’s Naval Service as the Anchor of his Autonomy

The beginning of John Kennedy’s public persona is generally cited as the glorification of his naval service in the Pacific during World War II. Initially, he was denied entry into the armed forces because of a failed physical examination in mid-1941. Kennedy had been a sickly child, often bedridden with a variety of ailments, from scarlet fever to stomach complaints. He was ultimately able to enlist in October 1941 following an intervention from his powerful father Joseph Kennedy, former ambassador to England. This would be the first of many instances in which his health proved a barrier, yet as would become the norm, his physical frailty was concealed and denied to allow him to pursue vigorous masculine endeavors. Kennedy began his service in the intelligence department, but was later transferred (at his request) to active duty in 1942. He served as skipper aboard the PT-109, a torpedo boat patrolling off the Solomon Islands.
The PT-109 incident is the cornerstone of the Kennedy narrative, and served to erase many of the challenges to his masculinity that would otherwise arise from his affluent background and his poor physical stamina. On August 2, 1943, a Japanese destroyer slammed into the boat, and sunk the craft. Two men were killed instantly. Kennedy rallied the other ten survivors to swim to a nearby island. One of the sailors was unconscious, and Kennedy pulled the man to shore by holding the strap of his life jacket in his teeth for the duration of the five-hour swim. The crew waited for rescue for six days, and with the help of islanders, were eventually rescued by other American sailors in the area. The PT-109 made the front page of the New York Times on August 20, 1943: “Kennedy's Son Is Hero In Pacific As Destroyer Splits His PT Boat.” The incident earned Kennedy the Navy and Marine Corps medal, the branch’s highest honor, as well as the Purple Heart for wounds received during battle.

Though the series of events and descriptions of what actually happened that day in the South Pacific has been called into question, within the popular imagination, John F. Kennedy was nothing less than a hero in the public eye. His demonstration of heroism met all the requirements of a would-be leader: decision-making skill, self-sacrifice, and above all, victory. Though Kennedy would spend the rest of the war in the hospital recovering, his accomplishments with the PT-109 were sufficient to solidify his political potential. Interest in the event did not stop with the initial reports. John Hersey, considered a father of New Journalism, wrote a profile on Kennedy and the PT-109 for the New Yorker Magazine in 1944, titled simply “Survival.” Hersey combined narrative fiction techniques with his own interviews from the survivors. John Hellman credits this
work of literary journalism with the creation of what he dubs the “Kennedy Myth,” the identity that would make a candidate desirable to a would-be voter.

In the production of John F. Kennedy, “Survival” is a narrative experience made possible by the vehicle of a mythic hero, not a simple celebration of a ‘war hero.’ In Hersey’s text, Kennedy is the means by which the reader undergoes a set of literary operations creating an experience of deeply mythic resonance. In 1946 readers in Kennedy’s congressional district in Boston would bring this experience, felt internally but perceived as that of the man before them, to Kennedy’s performances as a candidate. 81

Kennedy would call upon Hersey’s interpretation of events as he rose through the political ranks. Pleased with the presentation of himself as hero, Kennedy was less pleased that the story was featured in the highbrow New Yorker, believing that Life Magazine would have been a better vehicle for him. 82 The story was later published in condensed form in Reader’s Digest the same year, and this version would be distributed to voters in Kennedy’s congressional district.

It was this more proletariat version that the 1960 presidential campaign turned to as well, this time embedded within a television commercial hosted by film star Henry Fonda. Fonda, himself a veteran of the war and a figure known for his presence in war films, describes the events surrounding PT-109, and tells viewers he’s known about the greatness of Kennedy thanks to Hersey’s article:

I’ve always been an admirer of Franklin D. Roosevelt. So I was especially interested recently when I saw a movie of FDR as a young man. His fight against polio, his courage, his endurance, his will to live: it was an experience that history says had a deep influence on the leadership he gave our country at a time when our country was hurt and stricken, when we all needed courage and endurance.

I know another man like that, with the same strong character and

82 Ibid. 40
indomitable will to live. And this I have known for over 15 years, ever since I read an article in the *Reader's Digest* by John Hersey about a young Naval officer in the Solomon Islands during some of the darkest days and nights of World War II.

Fonda then provides narration as the viewer is shown images of boats at sea, cannons firing, bombs exploding, and American and Japanese flags waving. He tells the story of the boat’s sinking, and Kennedy’s role in the rescue of the crew. The video then turns to a man wearing a suit, who neither says his name nor is introduced via title card. He then provides his endorsement of the candidate:

Senator Kennedy never liked talking about this himself, but I was a member of that crew, and believe me, we really had it rough. I would like you to know what the Navy said when he was decorated: "His outstanding courage, endurance, and leadership contributed to the saving of several lives, and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval service."

Though Henry Fonda is a celebrity, his name known for his representations of a fighting man in a variety to American wars, the actual veteran that has first hand knowledge of Kennedy’s actions in the South Pacific apparently merited no official introduction, his name not important enough to include. His eyewitness account not only served as a validation of the story, but also provided the necessary modesty for the candidate to avoid accusations of arrogance: “Senator Kennedy never liked talking about this himself.”

Fonda then returns to conclude the four-minute video message:

Courage. Endurance. Leadership. John F. Kennedy has them all the way. And the way has been the hard way. As president, John F. Kennedy will have the courage to meet the greatest challenge our country has ever faced. He'll have the endurance to do the work, to maintain the patience, to possess the raw nerve we need in a world where our enemies would like to win by wearing us down. (Violin music) And he will give us leadership for the '60s, a new American leadership for the world beyond the seas to honor and respect.
Fonda essentially argues that Kennedy has earned the right to the presidency “the hard way,” through physical heroism and endurance, masculine traits inherent to the character of the hero of the PT-109.

This argument pivots strongly against the narratives of the previous presidential election cycles. Unlike his Democratic predecessor Adlai Stevenson, the egghead who made his claims on the presidency through education and inheritance, Kennedy warrants election because of his physical bravery and stamina. Though Kennedy was also an affluent Ivy Leaguer, he deserved to hold the executive office because of the physical endurance he displayed; corporeal strength trumped strategic thinking. In some respects, Kennedy’s campaign rhetoric was even more invested in the warrior-hero narrative than Eisenhower: The General may have been the strategic mastermind, but Kennedy was on the frontlines, an “everyman” thrust into a battle for survival, emerging as the triumphant rescuer of his fellow American men.

The former crewmate’s claims of Kennedy’s reluctance to talk about his experiences on the PT boat were far from accurate. In fact, an analysis reveals that Kennedy mentioned his naval service in eleven different stump speeches prior to Election Day, 1960. Additionally, Kennedy campaigns from his 1946 Congressional contest forward deployed the narrative of the PT-109 as justification for Kennedy’s inclusion in the halls of power, and the argument was not always made through the voice of a surrogate. The habit of including the powerful anecdote of heroism is apparent in The U.S. Senator John F. Kennedy Story, a promotional film produced for Senator Kennedy's 1958 re-election campaign. The film features Kennedy in his Senate office as an unseen

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83 Search term “navy” in the Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse.
narrator asks him to talk about the items on his desk. First, he points out photos of his wife and infant daughter, but then quickly turns to a model boat with PT-109 stenciled on the side. The narrator then asks, “What about that coconut on your desk? That’s a rather interesting object.” The film quickly intercuts to a shot of a boat skimming across the ocean. The candidate says, “Well, our PT boat was sunk by a Japanese destroyer, and we found a native and gave him a coconut, and wrote a message on it, which he took through the lines. Boats came and picked us up about ten days later.” The video then cuts back to Kennedy. “I put the coconut in plastic and have kept it as a memento of more unpleasant days.” The narrator then draws the connection between Kennedy’s wartime service and his experience on Capitol Hill: “Senator, we note that your office is filled as well with objects of your legislative as well as your military battles.” This trope of the militarization of the political process would surface again and again, particularly when Kennedy’s competence or agency would be called into question.

The PT-109 story continued to resonate long after Kennedy’s election in 1960, inspiring its’ retelling in prose, film and song. The story flourished during the Kennedy presidency as well, with the publication of Robert Donovan’s 1961 book, PT-109: John F. Kennedy in World War II. The text was chosen as a McGraw-Hill Book Club selection, guaranteeing widespread readership. The book served as the basis for a film adaptation, released June 19,1963. The copy describing the film on a promotional poster provides a clear example of the function of the story in the making of the President: “PT-109 was a grimy battle-scarred veteran of the Guadalcanal campaign. Its skipper was a skinny, handsome and boyish lieutenant from Boston named John Fitzgerald Kennedy.”

The text compares the age of the boat with the youth of the captain, and infers for the
reader that it was the young man’s experience on the boat that led him to his powerful position today, that of sitting president of the United States. In 1962, popular country singer Jimmy Dean memorialized the narrative in a song that included a patriotic fife, drum and whistle accompaniment, as well as a racialized swipe at the former enemy:

Smoke and fire upon the sea  
Everywhere they looked was the enemy  
The heathen gods of old Japan  
Yeah they thought they had the best of a mighty good man

He led his men through waters dark, rocky reefs and hungry sharks  
Braved the enemies bayonets, a thirty-eight hung round his neck  
Four more days and four more nights a rescue boat pulled into sight  
The PT-109 was gone but Kennedy and his crew lived on

Now who could guess or who could possibly know  
That this same man named Kennedy  
Would be the leader of the nation, be the one to take command  
The PT-109 was gone but Kennedy lived to fight again

The lyrics were quoted in a Time magazine article in April 1962, and the song eventually reached the number three spot on Billboard Magazine’s Top Country Hits. Though Kennedy did not live long enough to sit for re-election, it is difficult to believe that these cultural representations of his heroism in the South Pacific would have been detrimental to the campaign. Though they celebrated the actions of a young warrior, a tale that happened two decades prior, these mass media retellings of the PT-109 story elevated the heroism and autonomy of the President of the United States beyond the status given by his occupation of an elected office.

The story of the PT-109 did more than make Kennedy as household name, more than establish him as an autonomous and noble character. Because of its easily accessible narrative of triumph over adversity, as depicted in the Henry Fonda spot, it worked to

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assuage accusations of otherness brought about by his Catholicism. Kennedy’s Catholicism proved problematic for the campaign not simply because it placed him outside of mainstream Protestantism. While there were certainly voters that may have held antipathy toward the theology of the Catholic Church, many chose to articulate their resistance to Kennedy’s candidacy by questioning the man’s autonomy. Would he be able to function as an independent leader or would he be under the direction of Vatican City? The coming-of-age tale, steeped in the notion of a manhood forged through the trials of war, fit well in the discourse of the Cold War era. Visual and Cultural Studies scholar John Michael argues that the incident made Kennedy “a representative figure of American manhood, despite his heritage and religion.” His ability to represent a generic, victorious American manhood worked to diffuse his relegation to the sidelines as only a Catholic candidate:

Kennedy’s courage in the Solomon Islands was part of a process that matured him, and made him fit, despite his Catholicism, to embody the nation and to lead it against the newer threat of godless communists in Russia and China who had atomic bombs and were bent on global domination. At the anxious midpoint of the last century, the PT-109 story, as it became part of his persona, aligned Kennedy with a mainstream racial and religious mythology that shaped popular accounts of the Pacific War and derived, in part, from an older mythology of American boyhood.\(^{85}\)

Michael argues that this coming of age story aligns well with those of other American presidents tested in war, placing Kennedy in a long line of military leaders that rose to the presidency, including Kennedy’s immediate predecessor Dwight Eisenhower.

The Great Equalizer: Military Service and the Erasure of Otherness

John F. Kennedy was not the first Roman Catholic candidate for the presidency. In 1928, New York Governor Al Smith took a run for the office as the Democratic candidate, and was soundly defeated by Herbert Hoover in a landslide, carrying only eight states. Though Smith had liabilities beyond his religion, including his anti-prohibitionist stance and involvement in the Tammany Hall scandal, his loss is widely attributed to anti-Catholic bigotry. Over thirty years later, the Massachusetts senator would face much of the same opposition to his religious practice. With force and clarity, this campaign positioned the question of Kennedy’s Catholicism as an opportunity for the candidate to staunchly declare his independence and autonomy, and to remind voters that his actions in the South Pacific had cemented his status as an autonomous decision maker.

Kennedy’s religion posed problems to the establishment of his autonomy because of the hierarchical nature of the Roman Catholic Church and its theology of intercession. Critics have disparaged its power structure for creating barriers to worshippers’ access to God, as well as usurping the divine power of Jesus Christ. Instead of directly appealing to God for forgiveness of sin or intercession in times of crisis, Catholics might confess to a priest or pray to a saint. The parish priest represents but the first rung on the church’s hierarchy of authority; his superior would be a bishop that represents a community diocese, his superior would be an archbishop, his superior would be a cardinal, with further levels of positions of authority leading up to the Supreme Pontiff, known as the Pope. This dilution of religious power to intermediaries (and away from direct access to God) creates multiple layers of authority for a Catholic like Kennedy to navigate.
Criticism also surrounds the practice of calling priests “Father,” a term fundamentalists believe should be reserved for God alone. The use of “father” is particularly gendered within the Church, and is related to a priest’s practice of celibacy; instead of becoming a father to his own children he is the metaphorical father of his flock of believers. Though the religion is steeped in a traditional patriarchy that excludes women from positions of authority, the elevation of a living man to the level of holy father has been perceived as a subversion of the natural order. Though his biographers have noted that Kennedy was not a particularly observant Catholic, in the eyes of voters his participation in the Church located him as part of this hierarchy of authority. The very practice of his faith placed him at the direction of a series of men vested with the power to speak for God, an intermediary between the parishioner and the Almighty.

The role of Kennedy’s religion in the results of the presidential election of 1960 has been widely debated by scholars across disciplines. Some have argued that statistically, Kennedy securely carried the Catholic voting bloc to ensure a victory. Others claim that if this vote were as secure as believed, the final margin would not have been as razor-thin as it was. While the debate continues about the true relevance of religion in the election results, there can be little doubt that the Democrat faced criticism from several corners, and that the Kennedy campaign engaged in a debate of the “religion issue” with much the same discourse as they had throughout their candidate’s political career.

Miller, Monica M. Sexuality and Authority in the Catholic Church. Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 1995. Pg. 103-105. This book argues for the theological basis of male ecclesial authority and the maintenance of a male-only priesthood. Politics aside, through an historical analysis of church doctrine, the author details the role of the priest in the life of the church. “Priests are true fathers because as they stand in persona Christi they are the means by which the divine life of grace is begotten among men. Because they participate in the fatherhood of God, they are a principle of regeneration.” Pg. 10.
Kennedy’s almost mythic status as a war hero was deployed as evidence of his loyalty to the nation and its culture.  

Kennedy faced anti-Catholic sentiment from various religious organizations and politically prominent conservative Protestant ministers, particularly celebrity thought leaders Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale. Opposition also arose from evangelical grassroots organizations across the nation; their efforts included the production newsletters and vitriolic tracts detailing the ill that would befall their own congregations with the election of a Catholic to the presidency. Scholars have debated the seeds of anti-Catholic sentiment in the political election process. Thomas Carty’s *A Catholic in the White House: Religion, Politics and John F. Kennedy’s Presidential Campaign* argues that some of the resistance was based in a racialized nativism:

> When John F. Kennedy pursued the presidency in 1960, however, some native-born Protestant Americans continued to portray Catholicism as an alien religion that threatened U.S. traditional values. These nativists still perceived Catholics as ignorant immigrants who could never fully assimilate into mainstream Protestant American culture, holding on to a vague belief that Protestantism molded the national traits of independence and individualism. In the nativist interpretation, Catholics could not resist clerical authority on fear of banishment from the religious community, and thus could not truly act as independent decision makers.  

Carty provides a detailed look at the manifestations of these beliefs, intrinsic to much of the resistance brought about by Peale and Graham, two of the most visible religious leaders in the nation at the time. While these two men presented themselves as religiously inclusive, the fathers of “the power of positive thinking” and the “new evangelism,”

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87 Several recent texts provide an excellent background on the role of Catholicism in the 1960 election. Thomas J. Carty’s *A Catholic in the White House? Religion, politics, and John F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign* (2004) argues that the Kennedy campaign actually leveraged anti-Catholic sentiment to its advantage to portray JFK as the underdog struggling against prejudice. Albert J. Menendez’s *The religious factor in the 1960 Presidential election: an analysis of the Kennedy victory over anti-Catholic prejudice* emphasizes the role of evangelical grassroots organizations efforts to defame Kennedy through the publication of tracts and newsletters. Also, though Nixon ‘s official stance on the religion issue was to avoid discussing it, there is evidence that he was complicit in some of the anti-Catholic rhetoric of the time. See Shaun Casey’s *Making of a Catholic President: Kennedy Vs. Nixon 1960.* (2009).

88 Carty, pg. 51.
respectively, they were vocal in their opposition to Kennedy’s candidacy. At a September 7, 1960 meeting of Citizens for Religious Freedom, a group comprised of 150 Protestant clergy, Peale made the proclamation that Kennedy’s election held doom for the nation. “Our American culture is at stake," said Peale. "I don't say it won't survive, but it won't be what it was."89

The strength of Norman Vincent Peale’s influence is difficult to overstate. Not only a religious figure, he was a media mogul in 1960. His nationally syndicated newspaper column, Confident Living, appeared in newspapers across the country. His radio show, The Art of Living, was nationally broadcast on NBC stations. His monthly magazine, Guideposts, had a wide national circulation and his books The Power of Positive Thinking and A Guide to Confident Living, had sold more than 4 million copies by the fall of 1960.

Instead of the nativist bigotry described above, others chose to locate their animus for Kennedy in fears that a Catholic was not free to make his own decisions, the pawn of the papacy. The final statement produced by the group summarized the opposition to the Democratic candidate for president as one not of nativism, but of independence and autonomy:

It is inconceivable that a Roman Catholic President would not be under extreme pressure by the hierarchy of his church to accede to its policies with respect to foreign relations, including representation to the Vatican ... Is it reasonable to assume that a Roman Catholic President would be able to withstand altogether the determined efforts of the hierarchy to gain further funds and favors for its schools and institutions, and otherwise breach the wall of separation of church and state?90

90 Ibid.
Turning the rhetoric to one of politics instead of culture, the group articulated the problem of a Catholic president as one of policy, not of the threat to American civilization. With the evocation of the church/state dichotomy, the campaign recognized the opportunity to directly confront this anti-Catholic bias with its readiest weapon: Kennedy’s military service.

Less than a week after the Washington, DC meeting of the Citizens for Religious Freedom, Kennedy accepted an invitation to speak to address the Ministerial Association of Greater Houston. He spoke to the crowd of almost a thousand Protestant ministers and pastors from the area. Boldly taking issue with the question of his divided loyalties, Kennedy included a subtle condemnation of his critics in his remarks, but generally focused on his masculine identity as a war hero as proof of his eligibility for the American presidency:

I believe in an America where religious intolerance will someday end, where all men and all churches are treated as equals, where every man has the same right to attend or not to attend the church of his choice, where there is no Catholic vote, no anti-Catholic vote, no block voting of any kind, and where Catholics, Protestants and Jews at both the lay and the pastoral levels will refrain from those attitudes of disdain and division, which have so often marred their works in the past, and promote instead the American ideal of brotherhood.

I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant or Jewish, where no religious body seeks to impose its will, directly or indirectly, upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials, and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all. This is the
kind of America I believe in and this is the kind of America I fought for in the South Pacific and the kind my brother died for in Europe.

No one suggested then that we might have a divided loyalty, that we did not believe in liberty or that we belonged to a disloyal group that threatened, and I quote, "the freedom for which our forefathers died." And in fact, this is the kind of America for which our forefathers did die. When they fled here to escape religious persecution that denied office to members of their favorite churches, when they fought for the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Virginia statue of religious freedom, and when they fought at the shrine I visited today, the Alamo. For side by side with Bowie and Crockett died McCafferty and Bailey and Carey. But no one knows whether they were Catholics or not. For there was no religious test there.

Kennedy continued his speech, discussing the Constitutional separation of church and state, as well as his “declared stands against an ambassador to the Vatican, against unconstitutional aid to parochial schools, and against any boycott of the public schools,” but as is apparent in the lengthy excerpt, the candidate essentially grounded his claims to the presidency through a participation in warfare. An essentially American identity, one that is not vulnerable to nativism or accusations of divided loyalty, belongs to Kennedy as a result of his easily accessible tale of military heroism. The demonstrable masculinity intrinsic to Kennedy’s naval service works to carve out his personal autonomy, free of the shackles of another governing body. His explicit denouncement of policies that would serve his church also served as evidence of his independence; Kennedy was a decision-maker free of influence from foreign entities.

Importantly, Kennedy’s alignment of his military service with the valorous story of the Alamo simultaneously works to deflect the nativist critique of his Catholicism. Widely held as an American tale of true grit and heroism, Kennedy cleverly listed the names of men with Irish surnames, linking his own ethnicity to the narrative of the
Alamo. It is notable that he did not include the Spanish surnames of those defenders of the Alamo that lost their lives, like Jimenez and Abamillo, though presumably they could have been Catholic as well.

Kennedy continued to argue for his autonomy as one that would stand up to any peril or danger of reprimand. “Whatever issue may come before me as president — on birth control, divorce, censorship, gambling or any other subject — I will make my decision in accordance with these views, in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressures or dictates. And no power or threat of punishment could cause me to decide otherwise.” Again, his strength seems to be articulated in juxtaposition to a potential physical harm. Though one could imagine other sanctions the Church might mete out, the language “threat of punishment” seems to infer a corporeal punitive action. Kennedy’s masculine strength would defend against whatever this would-be punishment could look like.

The Houston speech is widely considered to have been successful to dispel many, if not all, of the fears religious authorities would usurp Kennedy’s autonomy. In the final month of the campaign, three different half-hour film versions of the speech were shown on television at least 193 times in 40 states. However, the speech and its filmed reproduction not the only weapon of the campaign. The week of the speech, the Democratic National Committee published a memorandum detailing the history of Kennedy’s declarations of autonomy from the church hierarchy, positioned as a sort of fact sheet describing “areas of concern about which questions are frequently asked by fair-minded persons.” The memo included the often-mentioned opposition to an

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ambassador for Vatican City and lack of funding for parochial schools, including the publication citations for each instance that Kennedy made his policy positions known. The *New York Times* op-ed pages asked, “What more could Senator Kennedy possibly say to clarify his divorcement from any real or imputed political stand of the Catholic Church?” It would seem the campaign was able to dispel these challenges to his autonomy, if not entirely diminish anti-Catholic sentiment.

The other major challenge to Kennedy’s candidacy was his entrenchment in his family of origin, connected to the persistent belief that his accomplishments were largely the result of his father’s influence and wealth. Though his father’s connections were used to secure Jack Kennedy’s sea duty, his actions on the sinking of his vessel are attributed to his bravery alone, a true thing that could be claimed as his own. Robert T. Hartmann, the *Los Angeles Times* Washington Bureau Chief, published a column on February 29, 1960, titled “Kennedy Faces Many Problems.” Largely a reflection on the senator’s religion, he notes that the “adventure in the Solomons” marked the beginning of Kennedy’s journey away from this father’s sphere of control. “That was, perhaps, the only time he ever was wholly on his own, where the $1 million his father gave him wouldn’t buy one cup of water,” wrote Hartmann. Once again, Kennedy’s physical suffering, and his strength overcoming the challenges of warfare, would be used to deflect accusations of his dependence on his father’s wealth and position. The campaign would, once again, leverage their candidate’s war heroism to refute these claims. Yet there would be a new addition to their arsenal, a demonstration of Kennedy’s own patriarchy and regenerative capacity. Instead of being positioned as a son, he would be

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positioned as a father.

“It’s not the pope that worries me, it’s the Pop”: Securing an aura of independence through enhanced representation of fatherhood

The strongest challenges to Kennedy’s presidential candidacy, from the primary to Election Day, were those that questioned his autonomy and independence. From his youth (coupled with the heavy handed involvement of his wealthy father) to his religion, Kennedy was not perceived as a sovereign decision maker. He was believed to be beholden to the direction of his father as well as his church. These factors required Kennedy to articulate his own manhood as something that stood apart from that of his family of origin or of his faith. The campaign sought to conceive of an autonomous identity for their candidate, particularly by leveraging his identity as a war hero and father, a self-made patriarch in his own right.

If Kennedy’s autonomy was subtly challenged on the grounds of his religious practice, it was directly attacked by key leaders in the Democratic Party, perhaps most vociferously by former President Harry S. Truman. In July 1960, Truman resigned his role as a delegate from Missouri in protest over the political rise of Kennedy. Citing that the convention was becoming a “pre-arranged affair,” he goes on to argue that wealth should not play a role in whether or not a man has the opportunity to become President. As his remarks continue, Truman went on to virtually erase John Kennedy’s personhood, mistakenly calling the younger man by his father’s name:

I want to make it clear that my disappointment in the manner in which some of the backers of Senator Joseph F. Kennedy have acted involves in no way, in my own mind, the person or the qualifications of the Senator himself. I think, to a great extent, Senator Kennedy is a victim of

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94 Harry S. Truman, Page 174 in Donaldson
circumstances brought on by some of his most overzealous backers, which is unfortunate and unfair to him.\textsuperscript{95}

Truman completes his statement by entreat ing Kennedy to be patient, and to encourage Democrats to find a man that could unite the party in pursuit of the presidency. Following the press conference, a reporter asks the former president whom he would include among these overzealous backers, and Truman replied, “I’ll let you make up your own mind on that. I told you I was not naming any individuals, and if you fellows don’t what know what’s been going on…you’re not very good reporters.”\textsuperscript{96}

At the de facto head of the Democratic Party, Truman’s condemnation effectively marginalizes John Kennedy’s masculinity and his adulthood, labeling him as a mere puppet at the whim of a more powerful player operating behind the scenes. In Truman’s view, Kennedy does not have the requisite autonomy to lead the national in challenging times. His word choice of “victim” further situates him as a subordinate figure, acted upon instead of functioning as an actor. Truman’s direct address to John Kennedy functions to infantilize him further: “May I urge you to be patient? You will recall that I suggested to you at our meeting in Independence that all personal ambitions be put aside and that we all join forces to seek out such a man who could unite us in purpose and in action.” Young Kennedy, clearly, is not man enough to handle these responsibilities, and Truman summons up his own status as the symbolic patriarch of the Democratic Party to ask the young upstart to stand aside.

Kennedy forcefully responded to Truman’s criticism two days later, on Independence Day, 1960. Calling the elder statesman “one of our most dedicated and
courageous presidents,” Kennedy declared his intentions to continue campaigning: “I do not intend to step aside at anyone’s request.” He went on to describe his trials on the campaign trail, and evoked a sense of physical danger that he faced. “I have encountered and survived every kind of hazard and opposition, and I do not intend to withdraw my name now on the eve of the convention.” This language of challenge and warfare foregrounds his rebuttal of Truman’s accusation of inexperience: “Let me say this as objectively as I can. I did not undertake lightly to seek the presidency. It is not a prize or a normal object of ambition. It is the greatest office in the world. And I came to that conclusion that I could best serve the United States in that office after eighteen years in the service of this country, first as a naval officer in World War II and for the past fourteen years as a member of the Congress.” By creating a vision of the primary campaign as a grueling militarized space, Kennedy paves the way for listeners to draw upon previous knowledge of his wartime heroism as justification for his inclusion in the presidential race. He need not specifically mention his experiences in the Solomon Islands in order to access the cultural mindshare it holds with the American people. His firm response to Truman works to establish Kennedy’s independence and the perception of his autonomy: he neither kowtows nor apologizes, and neither does he engage with the unspoken sentiment in Truman’s criticism, that Kennedy is in fact a pawn of his wealthy, powerful father. Instead, he falls back on his wartime accomplishments, an anecdote difficult to challenge.

Following the convention in Los Angeles, Truman eventually threw his support to the Kennedy campaign. Many speculated that his conversion to Kennedy supporter was more vested in his hatred of Richard Nixon than his love of the senator from
Massachusetts. Whatever the reason, images of Truman’s face were included in Kennedy’s advertising campaign, and his name was featured in speeches on the greatness of the Democratic Party. However, the liability of the Truman criticism lingered. Nixon brought it up during the second televised presidential debate on October 13, noting “Both Senator Kennedy and I have felt Mr. Truman's ire; and consequently, I think he can speak with some feeling on this subject.” Nixon understood the value of reminding viewers that Kennedy potentially lacked support from the party establishment.

The Kennedy campaign worked to erase perceptions of their candidate’s inexperience through direct address in speeches and during the debates, but also made a playful attempt to dismantle this stigma in a campaign spot very similar to the “Ike for President” campaign of 1952. With quick cuts between images of average Americans, the candidate and his family, and illustrations of drawn hands holding up campaigns signs featuring slogans like “A Time For Greatness,” the commercial is an energetic sixty-second encapsulation of the Kennedy campaign’s talking points. The images were featured along with jazzy musical exhortation to vote for John Kennedy, including this stanza:

Do you want a man for President who's seasoned through and through,  
But not so dog-goned seasoned that he won't try something new?  
A man who's old enough to know, and young enough to do?  
Well, it's up to you, it's up to you, it's strictly up to you.  

While the rest of the spot goes on to praise general traits admired in any would-be leader (“Do you like a man who answers straight, a man who's always fair?”), the visuals on the screen include black and white photography of the figures from the Democratic

establishment like Eleanor Roosevelt, Truman, and running mate Lyndon Johnson, the film is also intercut with diverse images of supposed supporters, including workers in miner’s hats and a group of African American women in the uniforms of domestic workers. A populist approach, there are no images of apparently affluent voters, men in suits, or other images that might evoke memories of Kennedy’s elevated class status. Instead, this call to action, noting that “it’s up to you,” places the power in the voters’ hands and away from those who would question the candidate’s experience, presumably those party leaders on both sides of the aisle that would undermine his candidacy.

Wresting the power away from both Nixon and Truman, Kennedy essentially vests the voters with the autonomy he is accused of lacking.

Recognizing it was not enough to buttress his own candidacy through demonstrable autonomy and independence, the Kennedy campaign also sought to diminish the autonomy of its opponent Richard Nixon. Though only four years older than Kennedy, Nixon had relied on a rhetoric that extolled his eight years of experience as vice-president under Eisenhower. With the Republicans running on the slogan of “They understand what peace demands,” the Democrat took the opportunity to question Nixon’s independence from Eisenhower:

MALE NARRATOR: Every Republican politician wants you to believe that Richard Nixon is "experienced." They even want you to believe that he has actually been making decisions in the White House. But listen to the man who should know best, the president of the United States. A reporter recently asked President Eisenhower this question about Mr. Nixon's experience:

MALE REPORTER: I just wondered if you could give us an example of a major idea of his that you had adopted in that role as the, as the decider and, and final—

EISENHOWER: If you give me a week I might think of one. I don't remember.

(Crowd and Eisenhower laughter)
MALE NARRATOR: At the same press conference, President Eisenhower said:

EISENHOWER: No one can make a decision except me.

MALE NARRATOR: And as for any major ideas from Mr. Nixon:

EISENHOWER: If you give me a week, I might think of one. I don't remember.

MALE NARRATOR: President Eisenhower could not remember, but the voters will remember. For real leadership in the '60s, help elect Senator John F. Kennedy president.98

Nixon may have had experience on the international stage, but it was in a subordinate role. The spot reminds viewers that any position Nixon occupied was contingent upon the approval of Eisenhower. The Nixon campaign was never able to successfully refute these accusations.

Kennedy had successfully marginalized the independence of his opponent and strengthened claims of his own autonomy with the guise of a militarized masculinity. Yet he had another implement in his toolbox to demonstrate himself as an independent man free of the influence either of his father or his patriarchal church. Kennedy’s role as a father and a husband was one that was not coincidentally emphasized; it was intentionally represented as visual evidence of his adulthood and separation from his family of origin. Kennedy’s pregnant wife Jacqueline and toddler daughter Caroline provided ample proof of his masculine autonomy, a fulfillment of the American ideal, much like his contemporaries returning home from war, who sought out their own homes and roles as patriarch of a nuclear family. Kennedy’s campaign took his role as father beyond simple gender performance by infusing campaign communications with reference to children.

and their concomitant alignment with American futurity. Kennedy was able to use his role as father to young children as evidence of his ability to lead, but also as a marker of his status as a “regular” American, instead of an affluent, literary Catholic.

**JFK As Patriarch: Futurity, Children and the Democratic Campaign**

If the PT-109 story garnered Kennedy respect as a masculine war hero, it could be argued that his role as father and husband stood as equally important in securing him an intelligible American identity as a would-be president. Images of Kennedy with his wife Jacqueline and daughter Caroline were included in many of the campaign’s commercials, and Jackie herself appeared in spots directly advocating for her husband. Mrs. Kennedy’s role as style icon and symbol of feminine grace and strength has been researched and profiled almost as much as her husband’s. However, the inclusion of the characters of wife and daughter (and later son) in the development of the Kennedy persona were pivotal beyond that of increased likability. Instead of being Joseph Kennedy’s son, one of eight children of a wealthy, powerful man, John Kennedy was instead the father of Caroline and the husband of Jacqueline. Now it was he how held the role of primary patriarch, not his father. Kennedy’s wife and children symbolized his separation from his family of origin, distancing him from accusations of subordination to the will of his father.

Much like Richard Nixon did in 1952 with the Checkers speech, yet inexplicably failed to do in 1960, Kennedy included visual and verbal references to his family in his speeches and campaign commercials. In the “Jingle” spot previously described, the one-minute advertisement concludes with a shot of the entire Kennedy family, perfectly coiffed and smiling for the camera. But Kennedy’s family would serve as more than a
prop to demonstrate his status as an “every man.” Unlike Pat Nixon, who in 1952 was situated as an object in need of defense, Jackie Kennedy would serve as an effective surrogate for her husband, a living symbol of his role as a successful patriarch invested in American futurity and the lives of children.

Mrs. Kennedy’s presence in campaign communications, particularly the television spots, did more rhetorical work than simply situating her husband as a patriarch. Not only did Jackie appear in several campaign commercials alongside her husband, she appeared in several spots on her own; most well-known is the spot titled, “Mrs. JFK,” featuring her speaking in Spanish. She positions her husband as the candidate to protect the needs of America’s youth:

My husband will always watch over the interests of all sectors of our society who are in need of the protection of a humanitarian government. For the future of our children, and to achieve a world where true peace exists, vote for the Democratic Party on November 8. Long Live Kennedy!

Though unsaid, the “all sectors of our society” line can be read as a direct appeal to ethnic and class diversity, especially in light of the choice to convey the message in Spanish. This was not her only appeal to the minority vote; she appeared in an advertisement with John and calypso singer Harry Belafonte, set in the home of a Harlem couple as the candidate discussed his approach to school integration. Though she did not speak in the spot, her presence as the mother of Kennedy’s child lent credibility to his comments on the educational opportunity for the all of the children of America, not just the racially privileged. Mrs. Kennedy’ spots supported the notion of her husband as a populist and a patriarch equally concerned with the children of all Americans.

Mrs. Kennedy, visibly pregnant, occupied the symbolic space of the mother of the nation in one commercial featuring renowned pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock, known
for his influential book *Baby and Child Care*. Spock had endorsed Stevenson in a filmed advertisement during his 1956 bid for the presidency, but this spot in the 1960 election cycle looked fundamentally different, more like a physician’s consultation than a political endorsement. The two chatted in the Kennedy’s living room, and the four-minute spot ranged from federal funding for education to health insurance for senior citizens:

**DR. SPOCK:** I'm Dr. Benjamin Spock. I flew down to Washington this morning to do a small job for Senator Kennedy's campaign, and have made a call at the Kennedys. It's fun to be here.

**JACQUELINE KENNEDY:** Oh, I'm delighted, Dr. Spock, and very grateful that you would take the time from a busy schedule to come here from Cleveland. I wonder if perhaps you'd tell me some of the issues that you think are the most important in this campaign.

**DR. SPOCK:** The one that has me most steamed up is Federal aid to education, because I think in the present state of our country, both in terms of its ability to pay for things and its need for educated people, that this is one of the jobs that we ought to get started on. And I'm delighted that Senator Kennedy has made a big issue of this in the campaign and even more important than in the years previously, in his fourteen years in Congress and in the Senate, he really has worked hard for aid for education, for scholarships, for public libraries in regions that don't have them. He's really worked at these.

**JACQUELINE KENNEDY:** I know. It's such a long and often hopeless fight. We hope it will accomplish something as there seems to be such a shortage of schools and of teachers.

Mrs. Kennedy simultaneously occupies the position of mother and surrogate for her husband, speaking of policy and expressing dismay at the state of education that will concern her children as well as the children of the nation.

Jacqueline Kennedy’s involvement stretched beyond that of a secondary character or as a mouthpiece for her husband, while simultaneously remaining a symbol of her husband’s fatherhood. With her mobility limited due to a troubled pregnancy, noting that she wanted to travel but her “obstetrician firmly disagreed,” she wrote a series of
nationally syndicated newspaper columns that were published under the title “Campaign Wife.” Recognizing the value of an attractive, fecund wife as a method of establishing the manhood and symbolic autonomy of their candidate, the Democratic National Committee circulated the seven weekly columns between September 16, 1960 and November 1, 1960. Notably, the DNC also supplied a photograph of the Kennedys and their daughter with the column, emphasizing the power of the visual representation of the family unit. Perhaps more valuable than a series of personal appearances, the column instead bolsters the notion of Kennedy as a virile patriarch, his wife performing her natural role of reproduction within the confines of the domestic space.

While the columns were less than artfully written, they served as reminders of Kennedy’s role as a nascent patriarch, often linking this role to policy positions. Though many feature charming asides about life in Hyannis Port with Caroline (“we spent a cozy evening reading stories,”) they were infused with campaign talking points. For instance, in her October 6, 1960 column, Mrs. Kennedy reflects that “there is no more vital concern in every mother’s life” than the quality of schools. She goes on to note, “My husband has been deeply concerned with these problems and has recently supported in the Senate a successful effort to pass legislation providing Federal aid for school construction and for teachers’ salaries. At the same time he stresses that he is not for Federal control of education. He says traditionally local jurisdiction and academic freedom must and will be maintained.” Interestingly, Kennedy is articulating his investment in the autonomy of the states to operate outside of federal control, much as he has argued that he operates outside of the control of his father or his church. Within a few sentences, and without being explicit, Mrs. Kennedy attempted to remind readers that
Kennedy was a family man with a personal investment in the life of the nation’s children. Significantly, Mrs. Kennedy’s comments would not be open to the same level of scrutiny as other surrogates for her husband; she is neither an advisor nor an expert. She is merely a mother, claiming credibility from an appropriate gender performance and extending that credibility to her husband.

The “Campaign Wife” series and the endorsement of Dr. Spock are but a few instances of the campaign’s investment in a narrative that emphasized the importance of children. An analysis of the Annenberg/Pew Archie of Presidential Campaign Discourse revealed a huge disparity between the amount of time that Kennedy spent discussing issues that could be related to the welfare of children compared to his opponent. In the three months immediately prior to the election, the Kennedy campaign produced 22 advertisements that used the term “child” or “children” in their text, while the Nixon campaign produced two spots that used those terms. Thematically, Kennedy concentrated on issues regarding the immediate benefit of the nation’s children, including education, nutrition, school lunches, and Social Security benefits, while Nixon’s two references to children focused on more abstract benefits for America’s youth. One spot on economic security stated: “Ours is a growth based on paying our bills, too, not a system of reckless borrowing that will burden our children tomorrow.” The other featured Nixon speaking to the camera, telling viewers, “We must work unceasingly for peace so that our children may grow up in peace.” Though some of the disparity in mentioning children in the campaign advertisements could be dismissed to the sheer difference in the total number of ads produced by each campaign (Kennedy produced 98 spots, compared to Nixon’s 20), the contrast is still striking.
Kennedy chose to contextualize much of his policy discussion in terms of the rescue and deliverance of children. In the first debate between the two candidates, Kennedy chose to include a discussion of civil rights in his opening statement:

I’m not satisfied until every American enjoys his full constitutional rights. If a Negro baby is born—and this is true also of Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in some of our cities—he has about one-half as much chance to get through college as a white student. He has about a third as much chance to be a professional man, about half as much chance to own a house. He has about—uh—four times as much chance that he'll be out of work in his life as the white baby. I think we can do better. I don't want the talents of any American to go to waste.

He could have chosen to refer to the civil rights struggle of adult Americans, yet instead referred to the challenges of children. It could be argued that this metaphorical infantilization may have been geared to make the plight of these Americans more sympathetic. However, this device instead positions Kennedy as the solution to their problems. It is his dissatisfaction that serves as the catalyst for change, his beneficent patriarchal eye turned to the needs of babies, not toward an adult struggle. Within this frame, Kennedy sets himself as the adult in the situation, infantilizing people of color, a well-worn tool used to boost notions of white patriarchal supremacy. Though he may have been arguing for solutions to racial injustice, he did not yield any of his own privilege of autonomy.

All of this rhetoric surrounding children, both his own and those of the nation, worked to create an important impression of Kennedy’s independence and adulthood. Instead of locating him as the son of the former ambassador to England, John F. Kennedy is himself the father figure. Though this may seem an oversimplification, this narrative fits seamlessly with the sociology of the family. Masculinity and autonomy are anchored in the establishment of one’s own family, part of the traditional coming-of-age-story.
“Just as boys are expected to…leave their families (physically and emotionally) in order to achieve manhood, so, too, are they expected to return to family life after a period of time to create and lead families of their own.” Emphasis on the pinnacle of Kennedy’s story of fatherhood, his young child and his pregnant wife, supports his own masculine identity. He is the autonomous leader of the family, not the puppet of a shadow patriarch.

**From Promise to Policy: Gender Politics in the Foreign and Domestic Policy of the New Frontier**

The Kennedy campaign’s success, entrenched in a significant investment in traditional gender performance, translated itself into both foreign and domestic policy choices. From the brinksmanship of the Cuban Missile Crisis to the Space Race, it is not difficult to determine that Cold War politics under the Kennedy administration were infused with the need to show the administration’s strength and competence, typically articulated in masculinist language like “vigor” and “toughness.” Robert Dean’s *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (2001) provides an excellent overview of the ways in which gendered ideologies informed the policy decisions of both Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. Dean focuses on the “republican manhood” taught in the elite boarding schools and Ivy League colleges through the 1930s and 40s, and posits that Kennedy’s cabinet and advisors were shaped by a resistance to the crisis of masculinity of the era. Dean’s analysis of Kennedy’s career argues that his commitment to these gender ideals functioned as “masculinity as ideology,” a system of beliefs directly responsible for the nation’s strategy of nation building in Southeast Asia.

“Counterinsurgency became a kind of bureaucratic cult in the Kennedy administration,

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serving as an institutional expression of the masculine ideals embraced by the president and many members of his national security staff. This idealized narrative had profound policy consequences.” These consequences, of course, were the decades long involvement of American “military advisors” in Vietnam, numbering 16,000 by the time of Kennedy’s death in November 1963. By the time of troop withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973, almost 60,000 Americans were killed in action, in addition to profound loss of life in the civilian population. American involvement in Vietnam would shape political culture and domestic policy for the rest of the 20th century.

The administration may be remembered for its foreign policy agenda, but the domestic policies introduced by Kennedy and fulfilled by the Johnson administration were also significantly anchored in gendered ideology. Civil rights issues were at the forefront of political discourse in an era that saw both peaceful and violent protests in the streets, including deadly riots following the integration of the University of Mississippi. In a televised address on civil rights in June 1963, precipitated by the presence of the National Guard at the University of Alabama to enforce the legal enrollment of two black students, the president adopted the same paternalistic anecdote to demand civil rights that he did during his debates with Nixon, with reference to the challenges faced by “the Negro baby.” He also included a call to action in the domestic spaces of the nation, aligning the efforts of the American family with that of the American soldier:

But legislation, I repeat, cannot solve this problem alone. It must be solved in the homes of every American in every community across our country. In this respect I want to pay tribute to those citizens North and South who've been working in their communities to make life better for all. They are acting not out of sense of legal duty but out of a sense of human decency. Like our soldiers and sailors in all parts of the world they are meeting freedom's challenge on the firing line, and I salute them for their honor and their courage.
Once again, the evocation of a militarized conflict is brought to bear in an understanding of a non-militarized situation. Kennedy has effectively turned the landscape of the American home into a battlefield to “meet freedom’s challenge.” A soldier’s courage is required to end discriminatory practices, to save the future of the nation’s children. Kennedy goes on to introduce the Civil Rights Bill, which would become law after his death in July 1964. Though few would argue that legislation providing for social and political equality had negative repercussions for the American social landscape, the gendered components of his logic should not be ignored. The idea of a militarized intervention was always at the forefront of the discourse, even when concerning the domestic space.

Kennedy’s campaign rhetoric and policy choices evinced an investment in traditional gender performance through choices of visual and verbal representations. The success of these choices would be imitated in presidential politics in every administration after his, with each successor calling upon the legacy of John F. Kennedy’s courage and bravery as a leader and his kindness and compassion as a father. Arguably, subsequent candidates have had less success, yet there seems to be little evidence that would-be presidents have moved away from his methodology.

The Kennedy Legacy: Implications for Future Campaigns

Few candidates following John F. Kennedy had access to his war hero narrative, and those that did were not as successful at manipulating it as he was. While Kennedy’s experiences in the Solomon Islands inspired mythic representation in popular culture, other veterans found their wartime experiences either unpersuasive or millstones. Gerald
Ford’s wartime accomplishments did not garner him re-appointment to the office of the presidency, nor did Jimmy Carter’s experience as a naval submariner. Another wealthy Massachusetts Senator, the 2004 Democratic nominee John Kerry attempted to use his experience as a U.S. Navy swift boat captain in Vietnam to strengthen his image as a warrior-leader, but was subverted by former colleagues who called into question his service record, including whether or not he deserved several of his combat medals. Another unsuccessful candidate, 2008 Republican nominee John McCain, moored his claim to the presidency in military valor, repeatedly reminding the electorate of his five years as a prisoner of war in a Vietnamese prison after his plane was shot down over Hanoi in 1967. Whether or not there was something particularly persuasive about Kennedy’s heroism, or whether the story itself was just better packaged than the others, provides an area for further consideration.

Though there would not be a 1964 re-election campaign for John Kennedy, the lessons learned from the campaign of 1960’s inclusion of children were implemented by his predecessor Lyndon Johnson and Republican Barry Goldwater in 1964. Though the issues of the day, from the war in Vietnam to civil unrest, were significantly different than in 1960, the candidates infused their political campaign communications with much of the same child-based discourse as the Kennedy campaign. Johnson’s infamous “Daisy Girl” spot featured images of a young girl juxtaposed with images of a hydrogen bomb explosion, while Goldwater’s campaign produced a spot depicting an American classroom with students pledging allegiance to the flag intercut with images of Soviet Premier Khrushchev speaking Russian, while subtitles flashed “WE WILL BURY YOU” and “YOUR CHILDREN WILL BE COMMUNISTS.” Though more fear-mongering
than sympathetic, both campaigns recognized the emotional appeal of children, and the value in positioning their candidate as their rescuer.

Much of the campaign rhetoric surrounding the election of 1964 focused on the maintenance of the American way of life, supposedly challenged by the virulent aggression of the anti-religious, unconventionally gendered politics of the Soviet Union. Though Goldwater and Johnson had children, they were much older at the time of the election and were not as readily leveraged as a visual image of heteronormative masculinity. The campaign commercials of these two candidates built on the trend of the previous election of using children as symbols not only of the national future, but also as evidence of the candidate’s positioning of himself as a would-be patriarch. These representations of children in peril would coalesce with what Lauren Berlant has called “infantile citizenship,” arguing that the media has contributed to perceptions of who among the nation’s citizens merit this kind of deliverance.

Kennedy’s opponent Richard Nixon was finally successful with his 1968 campaign. Notably, Nixon included more images of children in his campaign, painting himself as the patriarch he failed to be as in 1960. His acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention revealed the turn, with Nixon proclaiming:

Tonight, I see the face of a child. He lives in a great city. He is black. Or he is white. He is Mexican, Italian, Polish. None of that matters. What matters, he's an American child. That child in that great city is more important than any politician's promise. He is America. He is a poet. He is a scientist, he is a great teacher, he is a proud craftsman. He is everything we ever hoped to be and everything we dare to dream to be. He sleeps the sleep of childhood and he dreams the dreams of a child. And yet when he awakens, he awakens to a living nightmare of poverty, neglect and despair. He fails in school. He ends up on welfare.
For him the American system is one that feeds his stomach and starves his soul. It breaks his heart. And in the end it may take his life on some distant battlefield. To millions of children in this rich land, this is their prospect of the future. But this is only part of what I see in America. 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 in his chosen profession of politics, first there were scores, then hundreds, then thousands, and finally millions worked for his success. And tonight he stands before you—nominated for President of the United States of America. You can see why I believe so deeply in the American Dream.

Rhetorically, the child has become the nation (“He is America.”). Nixon details his transition from child to father, ready to become the leader of that nation, the protector of that child. The language of this speech would be revised to include a call to action for viewers. Featuring images of a diverse group of children, Nixon’s voice over pleads, “He must not be the victim of a system that feeds his stomach, but starves his soul. I ask you to help me make the American dream come true for those to whom it seems an impossible dream today.” This reversion to the role of patriarch proved successful for Nixon in 1968, just like it did in 1952, giving him yet another “comeback” story.
Jimmy Carter has been called the one of the worst presidents in modern American history, from his handling of the recession and stagflation to the gas crisis to his supposed declaration of a national “malaise.” But perhaps no other event marked Carter as a failure more than his handling of the Iran Hostage Crisis. On November 4, 1979, 54 Americans were taken hostage in the American Embassy in Tehran by a group of Islamic students. They were held in captivity for 444 days, released upon the inauguration of Ronald Reagan as the 40th President of the United States on January 20, 1981.

The Iran Hostage Crisis has been well detailed by historians and scholars of international relations, as well as within studies of presidential elections. But aside from brief mentions in larger texts, little has been made of the role that gender representation played in the wider cultural understanding of the crisis. From campaign commercials to an evening onslaught from broadcast news programming, Carter was cast as an ineffectual, neutered national father incapable of providing the required manhood to save his far-flung citizen children. Reagan, on the other hand, situated himself as a virile, masculine solution to the impotence of the incumbent. The former movie star’s campaign worked to leverage existing perceptions of the candidate as a man’s man, hewn from the stuff of the old west and brought to modernity.

Patterns of gender politics established during this crucial period in the beginning of the decade would go on to shape Ronald Reagan’s two terms in office. Analysis of media sources, Reagan’s own writing, specifically his landmark 1983 essay *Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation*, and campaign commercials produced in the 1980 and 1984
campaigns reveal an investment in traditional gender roles represented in other presidencies, but that also function as a redemptive narrative from the international and domestic trials of the 1970s. I argue that the Reagan administration crafted a narrative with an investment not only in heteronormativity, but also in procreation, entrenched in an effort to shuck off the accusations of impotence levied at the Carter administration during the Iran Hostage Crisis. Yet that longed-for procreativity was not without constraints. Instead, only a particular kind of child could embody that retrieved masculinity: one that functioned as the center of a male-led, white household.

This chapter will provide a discussion of how the Iran Hostage Crisis emerged as a particularly gendered conflict, how this framing situated the crisis squarely within the confines of a national heteronormative family facing threats from abroad, and how this positioning informed popular opinion of the 1980 and 1984 presidential candidates. I will argue that the Iran Hostage Crisis and the notion of subverted American masculinity as well as the media’s construction of and response to it, went on to inform Ronald Reagan’s presidential campaigns, as well as his administration’s response to a breadth of domestic issues, including the abortion debate, the campaign against teenage pregnancy, and the movement toward welfare reform. In the conclusion, I will discuss the lasting effects of the fight to determine and define the appropriate masculinity of the nation’s leader as evidenced in the 1988 campaign and beyond.

**The Iranian Hostage Crisis: Constructing the Family Drama**

Like any event, the Iranian Hostage Crisis did not happen in an isolated moment in time. Coming at the end of the 1970s, amidst an energy and economic crisis and on the
heels of the Vietnam War, Americans may have been surprised with the overthrow of the embassy in Teheran, but they would have been able to contextualize the situation within familiar frameworks already at play in the national discourse. White male victims in the hands of foreign captors evokes an anxiety that Natasha Zaretsky details in her work, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline: 1968-1980* (2007). She argues that representations of the family in peril, particularly the white middle class family, were familiar throughout the 1970s. Her analysis of the era anchors the origins of family as nationally known political players in the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, a collective of wives, mothers and siblings of American soldiers held as prisoners of war in the 1960s and 70s. This group publicly launched an advocacy campaign in the mainstream media to urge the Vietnamese to provide information about missing servicemen. The most vocal players were military wives, featured in print advertisements pleading that their children were unfairly suffering due to the unknown status of their fathers. Zaretsky notes, “By linking captured men to their families and transforming the POW story into a domestic drama, the campaign simultaneously vilified the North Vietnamese and portrayed America as victim rather than aggressor. In this way, the campaign constructed the private world of the family as a wounded and violable space of national injury, one under threat from a foreign adversary.”

This same linkage of Americans abroad in crisis to their families at home clearly happened in the Iranian Hostage Crisis. Melani McAllister’s seminal work, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (2001),

articulates this framing of the hostage crisis as a family drama. The book is a comprehensive analysis of popular culture representations of the Middle East over the course of the last-half century. Her discussion pivots on a variety of themes, including, importantly Orientalism, with primary sources that range from popular film to editorial cartoons to Steve Martin’s wacky performance as King Tut on *Saturday Night Live*, but she argues that these seeming pieces of detritus on the American cultural landscape serve as building blocks for consideration of peoples and places. “Cultural productions help make meanings by their historical association with other types of meaning-making activity, from the actions of state policymakers to the marketing of Bible prophecy. This suggests that we might ask less about “what texts mean”—with the implication that there is a hidden or allegorical code to their secret meaning—and more about how the texts participate in a field, and then in a set of fields, and thus in a social and political world.”\textsuperscript{101} It is this claim of a set of fields that grounds her later discussion of how the Iran Hostage Crisis was understood by the American people. One of the few scholars to explicitly note the gendered narratives that became the standard framework for discussing the situation in Tehran, McAllister links the representation of the captive Americans in 1979 to the Indian captivity narratives of the frontier 1700s, and notes that the representation of a nuclear family dynamic has long held sway in the construction of these tropes:

Gender was central to the Iranian captivity story, as it was significant at earlier points in American history, and family, domesticity and marriage figured visibly in public understandings of the crisis. The United States was distinguished from Iran (and captors distinguished from captives) in large part by the ways that the hostages were positioned within their

families, as part of the private sphere. The private sphere, identified with the activity of women and the affective life of the family, and imagined as separate from public life and politics, became politicized precisely through the staging of an imminent threat to its autonomy. With the family under siege as a highly visible trope, the preservation of a privileged site for the nonpolitical life of individuals became the signifier of American national identity. 102

Positioning the captives as husbands, fathers and brothers erases their roles as representatives of the American state on the international stage. Instead, they become only anchored in acceptable framework without potential responsibility for or investment in their involvement in Iran.

It should not be considered coincidental that the hostages that were retained in captivity for the longest time were men, particularly white men. Approximately two weeks after the siege on November 17, 1979, the women and black men being held, thirteen in total, were released, leaving behind a homologous group of white men as captives. Their continued captivity served as a festering symbol of subverted patriarchy and privilege. Responses to the POWs of the Vietnam era easily coalesce with the narrative that emerged from Tehran, white American men being held by the Oriental, this time Muslim instead of Asian, other. McAlister makes substantial arguments about how cultural interpretation of the Iran Hostage Crisis contributed to understandings about the Middle Eastern Other. But what launched this “set of fields” in motion? Media coverage of international affairs was, by 1979-80, commonplace. Walter Cronkite, Dan Rather and a host of others had briefed the American public from the frontlines of the fighting in Vietnam for decades, but the emergence of newer, cheaper satellite technology and a new late night timeslot for broadcast news provided a ripe opportunity to position the stories

102 Ibid. 199-200
of the hostages as an ongoing drama not of international diplomacy gone awry, but of patriarchy interrupted. ABC’s *Nightline*, created by former *Wide World of Sports* producer Roone Arledge, was the fallow field in which this narrative was born and flourished.

*Nightline*, now a thirty-year staple of ABC’s news programming, began on November 8, 1979, with the provocative title, *America Held Hostage*, originally intended as a one-hour special detailing the taking of the American embassy. Ted Koppel and Kyle Gibson’s book, *Nightline: History in the Making and the Making of Television*, details the origin of the series, and what prompted network executives to focus solely on the hostage crisis. Roone Arledge used anecdotal evidence from encounters with “real Americans” to establish why the story was so important, and merited its own daily slot of the schedule:

> Arledge, fired up by his conversations with taxi drivers and elevator operators and mesmerized by the volatile images out of Iran, was mystified to discover that a second special wasn’t even in the planning stages. When he asked why, he was told there wasn’t anything new to say. You announce the hostages are still held hostage, went the argument, but what do you do for the next twenty-nine minutes? “That argument,” recalled Arledge, “pissed me off. I said, ‘You don’t understand. People care; they cannot get enough about this.’ …This was their chance. They should seize late-night for the Iran crisis, and make it interesting [emphasis mine]. The Iranians were making a mockery of America; the American public wanted anything on it.”

Using the old entertainment saw of allegedly giving the people what they want, Arledge was able to secure another installment of *America Held Hostage*, this with the label *Day 11* affixed to the title. Based on positive ratings, the program was given the time slot for the duration of the crisis, at that time anticipated to be only a few weeks. Initially, the White House supported the program, as it was believed there would be positive response

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to the administration’s maneuvers to free the hostages. But interviews with the State Department’s spokesperson Hodding Carter were dull, and lacked real updates about the standoff. Substantive information was unavailable, and the situation was relatively unchanging. How could Arledge continue his own “siege” of late-night?

*America Held Hostage* “made it interesting” by leveraging emerging satellite technologies and emphasizing the intrapersonal narrative instead of policy debates. The wives and children of the hostages became frequent guests on the program imploring the Carter administration to free their men from the Iranians. With the new satellite uplinks, producers even staged confrontations between family members and Iranian officials.

After the metamorphosis from the periodic *America Held Hostage* to the daily *Nightline*, the premier of the new program featured a memorable instance with Dorothea Morefield, wife of the consul-general at the U.S. embassy in Tehran. On March 24, 1980, Morefield was broadcast live from a television station in San Diego. Simultaneously, Ali Agah, the Charge` de Affairs of the Iranian Embassy in Washington, DC was linked in to the conversation via satellite from his office in the embassy just down the street from the studio. The result was three-part conversation with two disembodied faces appearing on separate television screens. “For the first time on television,” intoned Ted Koppel, “we’ll provide for the wife of an America hostage to speak live with an Iranian official.” But before Mrs. Morefield was allowed to speak with the Iranian representative, a canned video package depicting the daily life of the Morefield children was shown. Lunches were packed. Cameras followed the boys to middle school, where they talked about how anxious they were about their father’s status. Mrs. Morefield worried that the experience
would permanently damage their adolescence. "I hope it doesn't hurt them and leave scars," she said.

The footage of the Morefield family was followed immediately by Ted Koppel’s gaze turning to Ali Agah, telling him that Mrs. Morefield had some questions for him. The Iranian official was ambushed, unaware that he would be asked to speak with the American woman. Mrs. Morefield was prepped before the interview. Though their conversation went on for a few minutes, ostensibly about the lack of mail being received by the hostages, this interchange is revelatory:

MOREFIELD: Well, certainly, my first question is how can the government of Iran, in view of the fact that your president admits what has been done is a breach of international law the UN has condemned your country for, how can you continue to hold these innocent people?

AGAH: It is mostly how can you remain silent in the past twenty-seven years when your government was involved in torturing, killing, and doing all kinds of corrupt actions against our people.

Throughout the interchange, Morefield never raised her voice or became overly emotional. She appeared in a business suit, and without a text placard on screen to identify her. There was no context provided regarding her involvement in the proceedings—the video package prior to the discussion was situated as being sufficient to establish her role of a concerned mother and wife. The validity of Mrs. Morefield’s role in a discussion surrounding the international political dynamics of the crisis was never questioned. ABC’s producers understood that her status as wife conferred upon her a perceived right to involve herself with a diplomatic official. Notably, Morefield’s comments declare the innocence of the captives, while Agah’s summon up questions of decades-long silence and complicity in the violence enacted upon the Iranian citizenry.
He said in response to Mrs. Morefield’s interrogation, "We cannot really ask these questions out of context…I am asking you to look at the whole picture, not just one segment of it."

Yet that contextualization was far outside her role in their orchestrated interchange. The assumed value of Mrs. Morefield’s participation in the discussion follows well-worn patterns of women’s involvement in the political realm. Managhan provides an excellent survey of the mechanisms women have used to gain traction within political discourse through their roles as symbolic mothers and wives of the nation, an analysis that blends the history of the recent American peace movements (the antinuclear movement, protests against the Gulf Wars and involvement in Afghanistan). Women’s involvement in the “vicissitudes of life,” particularly the physical care and education of children, led to a moral authority that served as an entrée into the public sphere as social reformers and activists. Within the American imaginary, this transition has seemed seamless, a natural extension of the act of mothering that extended to the social and political. “Here, their role became of translating personal and private matters (childrearing, hygiene, alcoholism, illness—i.e. the problems of others) into areas of social concern and intervention, and linking individual familial desires (for social recognition, economic security, autonomy, and the education advancement of children) to the greater public good or social welfare.” These arguments and discussions build on Sara Ruddick’s writing on maternal thinking and the rationality of care, yet notes that the voice of the anti-war woman has historically been white and middle-class. Feminist

105 Ibid. 27
theorist Patricia Hill Collins also makes this argument against the essentialism of Ruddick, rightly noting that historically, black motherhood has not been afforded the same social value as white motherhood, erasing the notion of a the acceptance of a universal maternalist standpoint. As will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, race plays a pivotal role the consideration of the mother as political actor, and of her children as appropriate, idealized American citizens. With respect to the Iran Hostage Crisis, because men of color were released almost immediately, the women who became known to the nation as advocates for their captured husbands furthered the representation of public women’s activism as a natural extension of the white, middle class homemaker’s experience of making political efforts on behalf of their family.

The hostage’s involvement in undermining the Iranian revolution never seems to come to the forefront of public discussion. “The Iranian situation was reduced to one story—the freeing of the hostages—rather than coverage of its background and context, of the complexities, of alternative American policies, and of contemporary parochial politics in a world dominated by superpowers. Such messages were not forthcoming in the face of counts of the number of days of captivity and more footage of angry demonstrators and emotional relatives of hostages.”107 As Judith Butler notes, the consideration of a valuable life is intrinsically entwined with the victim’s participation in a particular lifestyle and behavior, and depictions of the Iranian hostages conform to this model. These men are important; their loss is a loss to not only to their families but also to the nation. “A hierarchy…could no doubt be enumerated. We have seen it already, in the genre of the obituary, where lives are quickly tidied up and summarized, humanized,

usually married or on the way to be, heterosexual, happy, monogamous.”

Each of the hostages fits neatly into Butler’s description of a grievable, important life. As described in the *Nightline* segment, their subjectivity is solely and always as a husband or father, not as a political actor on the international stage.

*Nightline*’s producers were not concerned with holistic representation of the hostages or their roles in the Iranian Revolution. Their concern was the popularity of their program. Ratings increased with the involvement of the families. Koppel and Gibson note that the deployment of the hostage’s wives worked so well that they kept these women in the stable of potential guests, their celebrity frequently foreshadowing that of their husbands. Louisa Kennedy, wife of the third-ranking diplomat in Tehran, remarked that she was frequently recognized in the grocery store. “Viewers, she said, ‘knew us by our first names.”

In deference to the importance of the “live via satellite” phenomenon, the set was constructed to amplify the importance of the television screen that housed the talking head of the interview subject.

The lengthy discussion of the hostages’ wives’ role in the media, and their participation with *Nightline* in particular, serves to foreground a discussion of the way that both the Carter and Reagan campaign utilized the same tactics of gender politics as the producers of *Nightline* to situate their candidate as an answer to the threatened nuclear national family. The presidential election of 1980 used many of the same tropes of national fatherhood that were present in previous presidential campaigns, with the interwoven narrative of the family in peril, and each candidate deployed similar framing to represent themselves and their candidacy.

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109 Koppel and Gibson, pg. 44.
American Manhood Denied: “Impotence” in the White House

It is impossible to consider the media universe in which Nightline emerged without a discussion of the presidential election of 1980. An unpopular incumbent president when the crisis began in November 1979, Jimmy Carter was considered a weak-willed leader unwilling to flex American might to gain control of the economy, women’s rights or the rising influence of the OPEC states. Yet he occupied the role of national father through many familiar conventional methods. A graduate of the Naval Academy and the son of a peanut farmer, his personal characteristics did nothing to challenge notions of what an appropriate middle-class white male should look and act like. Instead of appearing in power suits, he wore sweaters like those of Mr. Rogers. He spoke freely of his religion and his love for his wife, as a candidate famously confessing to having lustful thoughts about other women in a Playboy interview.110 In addition to three grown sons, the Carters’ daughter Amy was nine years old when they moved into the White House. Within this framework and connected to these signifiers of dominant patriarchal masculinity, Jimmy Carter did not challenge constructions of what an American father should be.

Perhaps beyond these outward characteristics of appropriate paternal behavior, his perceived finger shaking chastised voters much as a father would. Commonly known as the “malaise speech,” Carter took to the airwaves on July 15, 1979 to talk about the energy crisis. His 18-minute speech, widely considered a liability in his re-election campaign, asked his constituency to take a modicum of personal responsibility through conservation, use of public transportation and increased taxes:

In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption… I'm asking you for your good and for your nation's security to take no unnecessary trips, to use carpools or public transportation whenever you can, to park your car one extra day per week, to obey the speed limit, and to set your thermostats to save fuel. Every act of energy conservation like this is more than just common sense – I tell you it is an act of patriotism.

As Kevin Mattson notes, initial reactions to the speech were positive. Carter was seen as taking a firm, fatherly approach to addressing national crises. His admonishment of Americans was initially well received. The initial response to the July 15 speech was positive. Carter's approval ratings shot up 11%. "Certainly many citizens who watched the president on television liked what they saw," Mattson writes. "The phone calls and letters testified to that." Yet pundits at the time decried Carter as being too paternalistic, speaking to Americans as though they were children.111

Not surprisingly, Reagan took the perception of Carter as national father and made of it an opportunity to assuage the feelings of the children citizens. Carter was an unfeeling, unsupportive parent that blamed his children in contrast to Reagan. “I find no national malaise,” Reagan said upon announcing his presidential candidacy later that year. “I find nothing wrong with the American people.” Reagan successfully juxtaposed himself to Carter as the supportive figure, instead placing responsibility for national ills on external factors as opposed to the possible personal failings of the electorate. This juxtaposition would arise throughout this campaign and the next, as the Republican was situated as not only a father figure, but as a redemptive one, perpetually evoking himself as a savior from the specter of failed masculinity at home and abroad.

111 Mattson, Kevin. "What the Heck are You Up to, Mr. President?: Jimmy Carter, America's "Malaise," and the Speech that should have Changed the Country. New York: Bloomsbury, 2009
The Carter campaign also embraced the same gendered narrative of patriarchal leadership. Though Carter did not directly address the accusations of failed masculine leadership, his campaign’s communications attempted to demonstrate his fulfillment of masculine ideals by referencing his past military experience, his role as father and husband, and his religiosity. Campaign commercials from both candidates embraced the idea that the President of the United States should comport himself with appropriate performance of gender, but Carter’s masculinity was generally tempered, benevolence contrasted with aggression. For example, the Carter/Mondale Reelection Committee prepared a commercial that emphasized the candidate’s current role as commander in chief of the armed forces, as well as his background as a Naval officer. From a podium, Carter sternly announces:

CARTER: My number one responsibility is to defend this country, to maintain its security. And I put a strong defense at the top of my priority list, and it's going to be maintained this way.

(applause)

MALE NARRATOR: It's good for the nation's security when the Commander in Chief is himself an experienced military man. Jimmy Carter, Annapolis graduate, is just that.

CARTER: Your presence in the Indian Ocean and in the Arabian Sea was crucial in that troubled region of the world, vital to all nations on Earth.

MALE NARRATOR: Yet even an expenditure of $136 billion dollars a year on the most modern weapons does not bring the final security. The final security comes only when nations eventually reach out to touch each other, in their minds and hearts. Jimmy Carter: A military man, and a man of peace.

(applause)

[TEXT: REELECT PRESIDENT CARTER]112

The video cuts between images of the president, at shots of tanks rolling through a desert landscape, bomb dropping, and ballistic missiles shooting into space. Carter speaks from the deck of an aircraft carrier, surrounded by uniformed officers. However, the final image that is featured in the montage (over a span of twenty seconds) is one of Carter signing the Camp David Accords with Israel’s Menachem Begin and Egypt’s Anwar El Sadat. Carter is positioned as a peacemaker, not an aggressor. His paternal role is that of negotiator between two brothers, not as a disciplinarian. Even his military experience is softened by an emphasis on education at the Naval Academy, not the years he served as a nuclear submariner during the height of the Cold War.

The representation of Carter’s benevolent patriarchy continued throughout the 1980 campaign season. Another spot begins with a long shot of a leather-bound book on a desk; on the book rests a pair of reading glasses. The camera slowly pans away from the book to a bronze desk sign that reads “O, God, thy sea is so great and my boat is so small.” The camera then moves from the placard to reveal the president in a darkened room only illuminated by a small desk lamp. The voice over announces:

MALE NARRATOR: Though he carefully observes our historic separation of church and state, Jimmy Carter is a deeply and clearly religious man. He takes the time to pray privately and with Rosalynn each day. Under the endless pressure of the Presidency, where decisions change and directions change, and even the facts change, this man knows that one thing remains constant: his faith.

TEXT: President Carter.

Carter, like the mythical founding fathers, is invested in a Christianity that looks to a holy father for consult and succor. While this representation concretely located Carter within a familiar, Judeo-Christian tradition, it does not position him as a leader or an agent of
change. Instead, he is the one acted upon, looking for aid from a higher power. Though the desk placard had originally belonged to John F. Kennedy, originally a gift from Admiral H.G. Rickover, the “father of the nuclear navy,” that is not made clear in the commercial, and it is difficult to know whether or not the audience understood its origins. What would have provided Carter an opportunity to affirm his identity as a military leader instead positions him as a supplicant.

Ironically, while Carter had been positioned as having all of the trappings of being perceived as the national father, albeit a bit of a disciplinarian, it was the specter of impotence that immediately bubbled to the top of the discourse surrounding the taking of the American embassy in Teheran. Though any other number of adjectives could have been used to describe the seeming stalemate between the Iranians or the failed rescue attempt, it was the one that was understood to be related to male sexual ability that seemed to carry the most weight. It was used by Iranians as well as by Americans, by advocates as well as adversaries. And Carter himself understood the threat of being associated with perceived sexual incompetence. As time drug on, accusations of American “impotence” grew from references to the hostages in Iran to variety of domestic and international issues, from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to withdrawal of American athletes in the 1980 Olympics. A sample of excerpts from news coverage indicates that the use of the word “impotent” or “impotence” was not rare or isolated:

An Associated Press International Brief quoted the Ayatollah Khomeini as saying he did not fear military intervention by the United States because "America is far too impotent to do so..." – November 7, 1979

Betty Glad cited a discussion between Carter and aide Hamilton Jordan: “As early as November 8, he had brushed aside legal objections to his decision to revoke the permit of Iranian students in the United States to demonstrate outside the White House. "I may have to sit here and bite my
lip and show restraint and look impotent, but I am not going to have those bastards humiliating our country in front of the White House!" 113

Walter Cronkite acknowledged that the first year of the new decade has "not gotten off to an auspicious beginning. We have heard America mocked and taunted as an impotent giant, gutless and evil," he said. "It has been a humiliating experience," television journalist Walter Cronkite told an overflow crowd of 2,500 at the LBJ Library/Museum, January 25, 1980 114

"After President Carter said he wanted the boycott in the national interest as a sharp rebuke to Soviet Russia for its invasion of Afghanistan, they [U.S. athletes] left him cut and bleeding, if not wholly impotent in the eyes of America's allies who'd been asked to join the boycott." Olympian Exhibit Of True Colors; Medals for 'Heroes' Absurd, The Washington Post April 25, 1980.

"In his aborted effort to rescue the American hostages in Iran, President Carter shockingly overcame the charge that he is super cautious. He is exposed instead as a crap-shooter, willing to gamble away the lives of Americans and the security of the country and its allies to reassert U.S. power against long odds. Before the failure, the United States-in the eyes of our friends as well as our enemies-was merely frustrated in its ability to respond to an improbable provocation. Now it has been demonstrated to be impotent." Chicago Sun-Times, Op-Ed, April 26, 1980

As time went on, Reagan’s candidacy became situated as a solution to this curse of American impotence. No less of a national figure than Henry Kissinger made the claim to the Republican National Convention in Detroit on July 15, 1980. “A new administration is needed, in short, to restore steadiness and coherence to our foreign policy" under Ronald Reagan "as the trustee of our hopes…Today, after nearly four years of confusions, we have become impotent bystanders as the world lurches from crisis to crisis," said Kissinger. 115

The campaign of the often forgotten contender in the election of 1980,

113 Glad, Betty, “Personality, Political and Group Process Variables in Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Jimmy Carter's Handling of the Iranian Hostage”
115 Kissinger Hits Carter for "Diplomacy of Incoherency" The Associated Press July 15, 1980, Tuesday, AM cycle
independent John Anderson, also contributed to the dialogue swirling around America’s perceived impotence. “"I think Carter is the worst President we've had in this century," said David Garth, Anderson’s media consultant. "I think he is even worse than Nixon. In his own way, this guy is politically impotent.""116 And less than a month shy of the election, Anderson himself threw fuel on the fire consuming Carter’s masculinity. “We have surrendered our country to those who are complacent, to those who are impotent, to those who see a risk in change,”117 he said.

It may be useful to provide a definition of impotence for the purposes of understanding what other word choices these commentators could have chosen in their discussion of the Carter administration, its actions and its policies. Merriam-Webster provides two definitions of the word:

a: not potent: lacking in power, strength, or vigor: helpless

b: unable to engage in sexual intercourse because of inability to have and maintain an erection; broadly: sterile. 118

While commentators may have been accurate in their assessment that the administration was “impotent,” as defined in the first entry, during the years under consideration, it begs the question as to whether another adjective may have provided a synonymous understanding without the gendered stigma offered by the second definition. Could Carter, and by extension, the United States, have been categorized as “helpless,” or other, similar pejorative terms, like “ineffectual,” “vulnerable,” or “weak”?

117 John Anderson- United Press International- October 03, 1980
While some of the above terms certainly were used to describe the White House and the United States during 1980, it is telling that national thought leaders sought to deploy the term impotent to describe the administration. Walter Cronkite, popularly considered “the most trusted man in America” since 1972, was serving at the CBS anchor desk in 1980 at the time that he made his comment. Polls indicated that audiences valued his commentary and analysis. Asked specifically if Cronkite was "someone you could really trust" 81% said they could, and on 12% said not.119 When a national figure with this level of influence and stature evokes the term and refers to being humiliated, those Americans who have indicated him as a trustworthy figure must assume the veracity of his claim, that indeed, America is perceived as an “impotent giant,” physically strong but effectively neutered, incapable of meeting the expectations of its citizens and the wider world.

Months later, Henry Kissinger took up the mantle of problematic American impotence. As a former Secretary of State and international figure, his solution for American impotence is the election of Ronald Reagan. Of course, Kissinger was well-known to be invested in partisan politics, affiliated with the Republican Party for decades. But it is his particular use of the term, and his framing of the problem, that is telling. Addressing party faithful at the national convention, an event launched under the theme “Make America Great Again,” Kissinger used the term “impotence” three times his brief remarks, asserting that the current administration was the cause of the situation, and that the only salvation for a new standing in the world is the Republican ticket. “The American people know better. They understand that confusion, timidity, impotence and

incompetence risk war. They know that firmness and constancy are the best insurance for peace.  

Kissinger concludes his speech with a call to action. “We all now turn to Ronald Reagan as the trustee of all our hopes. He will have the dedicated support of all of us, for we know that his election is essential to the future of freedom everywhere and to the progress of America. Under his leadership we will overcome the storms ahead; we will hold our heads high and we will build that better world at peace that fulfills the dreams of mankind and the highest ideals of the American people.”

This brief sample of those who levied accusations of impotence at the United States and its President is telling. First, the word is attributed to Khomeini, though it should be assumed the man did not speak this particular word himself, and that is was the result of a translation from Arabic. Regardless, it would seem that this accusation of American impotence planted the seeds for the resulting discourse. Carter himself understood the dangers of being labeled impotent, and his opponents recognized the value of leveraging this word against the president and the United States. Note that the two entities have been conflated: Carter is impotent, the nation is impotent. This conflation signifies the weight placed on the appropriately performed masculinity of the nation’s leader. The taint of impotence easily contaminates the body politic, weakening the whole. It is impossible to ignore the gendered implications of the use of the term “impotent,” or the framing of Reagan as a trustee of American hopes. Americans are to understand that Ronald Reagan’s administration will cure the widely dreaded national impotence, and retrieve America’s international dominance, and a metaphorical masculinity. “The highest ideals of the American people” do not include timidity, according to Kissinger, humiliation,

120 ADDRESS BY KISSINGER AT G.O.P. CONVENTION The New York Times July 16, 1980, Wednesday, Late City Final Edition
according to Cronkite, or complacency, according to Anderson. Each one of these negatives is coupled with accusations of impotence, popularly understood to be male inability to participate in sexual intercourse. As will be discussed later in this chapter, the perception of national impotence, and the resulting concomitant sterility, works to produce fears about a possible lack of national futurity. These fears, and the Reagan campaign’s manipulation of them, effectively marginalize those citizens that could not or would not participate in this idealized model.

Retrieving Power and Virility: Reagan as the Trustee of American Masculinity

As Henry Kissinger articulated in his speech at the Republican National Convention, Ronald Reagan’s ascendancy to the presidency was to provide a cure to the national impotence brought about by Jimmy Carter’s failed leadership. It is obvious that a challenger’s campaign would seek to exploit the chinks in the armor of the sitting president, but the Reagan campaign’s methodology was invested in subverting his opponent through gendered attacks on his masculinity, particularly in reference to the Iran Hostage Crisis.

The narrative of the 1980 campaign, so well articulated by Kissinger’s remarks, was to position Reagan as a masculine alternative to Carter; strength in opposition to weakness, tradition as opposed to change, especially in regards to the performance of gender roles. A review of selected campaign commercials and mass media interviews, as well as an examination of the Republican Party’s official platform, makes clear the campaign’s strategic leveraging of gender politics in an effort to gain the presidency.
Though he is remembered as a conservative icon and an advocate for traditional family values, Ronald Reagan did not fit the mold of prototypical American patriarch as well as Jimmy Carter did. Instead of a decorated submariner, he was an actor that served in the USO during wartime. Instead of a long-lasting marriage imbued with evangelical religiosity, the Republican’s background featured a failed Hollywood marriage to actress Jane Wyman that preceded his marriage to Nancy Reagan. A biological daughter and adopted son were products of the former union, adult children who were kept out of the limelight of the campaign because their maturity was perceived to make their father appear too old to be president (Reagan was 70 years old within a month of his election).

Writing in 1980, Lou Cannon, Chief of the Washington Post’s Los Angeles Bureau, (who would go on to become Reagan’s most prolific biographer), noted all the negatives about the candidate:

By the historical standards of the American presidency, Reagan seemed an…unlikely leader. The age showed in the dewlapped wrinkles of his neck. It showed in the Reagan campaign schedules which were generously endowed with ‘staff time that was the euphemistic reference to Reagan’s afternoon nap…He had not held public office in six years. He had no foreign policy experience. He had never worked in Washington. He was a divorced man espousing the values of the family, a wartime stateside noncombatant advocating military preparedness, a fiscal conservative who as governor had sponsored the largest tax increases in the state’s history.

The two children the campaign did vigorously include challenged the confines of gender norms of the era. His daughter, Patti Davis, was a part-time actress and waitress that had a very public long-term live-in relationship with Bernie Leadon, a founding member of the rock and roll band The Eagles. His namesake, Ron Jr. dropped out of Yale in 1976

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after one semester to pursue a career as a ballet dancer, and the campaign actively concealed images of the younger Reagan in his dance gear. A People magazine cover story in July 1980 focused verbally and visually on the son’s profession. “Like brother Michael, he played varsity football in high school and worked on his father's campaigns. He worked in the 1976 presidential race, and his entrance to Yale the following year was widely trumpeted by the Reagan staff. Then something happened: The family stopped mentioning Skipper. What happened is that Ron decided, at the age of 18, to drop out of college and become a ballet dancer.” The author does not need to articulate why a presidential campaign communications would stop mentioning the supposedly shameful aspects of having a son as a dancer. Instead, the issue was addressed in roundabout, veiled language. “‘He's all man—we made sure of that,’ his father told a reporter who raised the predictable question two years ago.” Accompanying the piece, the magazine dedicates a full page to a photograph of Ron Reagan performing a ballet leap in street clothes in the middle of Central Park. The “predictable” (and unspoken) question about Ron Jr.’s sexuality demonstrates the national investment in heterosexuality, while the candidate’s response distances himself and his son from the taint of homosexuality. The child is appropriately masculine, inherently as a result of the parents’ interventions (“we made sure of that.”)

Ronald Reagan’s presidential campaigns serve as a prime example of the positioning of the candidate as the head of a typical nuclear family. Reagan’s biography of an aging, divorced actor was sanitized by campaign strategists to present an image of the prototypical American husband and father. Previous marriages are erased from the

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scene, as are non-conforming children. Those aspects of reality that did not fit within this paradigm were quickly removed from the crafted narrative of Reagan’s life. One 1980 spot serves as an example of this messaging. “Nancy and I have four children, and a grandchild; hopefully, we’ll be blessed with many more…we’ve traveled this great land of ours many times over the years, and we’ve found that Americans everywhere yearn for peace just as we do. It’s impossible to capture in words the feeling we have about peace in the world, and how desperately we want it for our four children and our children’s children.” The text positions all four children as a product of the candidate’s current marriage (though does not feature any of them in the visual), Kaid and Johnston use this commercial as an example of what they call an “introspective spot, an opportunity for the candidate to reflect upon a problem or issue.”\(^\text{124}\) It is this promise of futurity, incumbent with the promise of unborn children (the symbolic antithesis of the charges of impotence and sterility levied against Carter) inherent in the script of the commercial that will play such a pivotal role in the next election cycle of 1984.

On the surface, it seemed the Reagan campaign did subvert traditional gender roles in one notable instance. During the 1980 campaign, though Ronald Reagan was a long established politician, the campaign chose to deploy his wife Nancy as a voice questioning why her innocent husband has been accused of bad acts, demanding an explanation in a polite, feminine voice. Nancy’s Reagan’s role in this spot is far outside the typical role of candidate’s wives, usually seen and not heard, present as physical markers of the man’s successful gender performance as a heterosexual. However, the

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1980 spot, dubbed simply “Nancy Reagan” provides a notable exception to this trend.

Seated in a leather armchair, staring directly at the camera, Mrs. Reagan begins speaking:

NANCY REAGAN: I deeply, deeply resent and am offended by the attacks that President Carter's made on my husband. The personal attacks that he's made on my husband. His attempt to paint my husband as a man he is not. He is not a warmonger, he is not a man who is going to throw the elderly out on the street and cut out their social security. That's a terrible thing to, to do and to say, about anybody. That's campaigning on fear.

There are many issues that are at stake in this campaign. I would like Mr. Carter to explain to me why the inflation is as high as it is, why unemployment is as high as it is. I would like to have him explain the vacillating, weak foreign policy so that our friends overseas don't know what we're going to do, whether we're going to stand up for them, or whether we're not going to stand up for them. And the issue of this campaign is his three and a half year record.

MALE NARRATOR: The time is now for strong leadership.

ON SCREEN: Reagan & Bush

There is no text on the screen that would serve as prefatory information to contextualize her comments, nor even a title card that would serve as an indicator of who she was.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson’s *Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising*, does not specifically address gender roles but notes that Nancy’s role as a wife gave her a privileged position to attack Carter that would not have been afforded to another surrogate. “When they did attack Carter as a person, it was Nancy Reagan who carried the message…This use of Reagan’s wife is a radical departure from the tradition of presidential advertising. In the past, wives have been featured in ads with their husbands, as were Jackie Kennedy and Mamie Eisenhower, or speaking about what they had learned in the campaign and what their husbands would do for America, as did both Muriel Humphrey and Eleanor McGovern. But here, Nancy
Reagan assumes the role of her husband’s champion.”\textsuperscript{125} Yet I would argue that Mrs. Reagan’s commercial is not as groundbreaking as Jamieson would claim, particularly in light of the relative frequency with which the wives of the hostages appeared on national television in 1980. This particular commercial aired twice on national television in the last weeks of October, an immediate precursor to Election Day, November 4. Recall that women acting as “champions” for their men, and demanding answers for accusations against innocent husbands, was nothing new within the public discourse. Mrs. Reagan occupies the same cultural space as Mrs. Morefield and Mrs. Kennedy, demanding justice by virtue of her identity as a wife, playing on the historical role of women in the public sphere as discussed earlier. This commercial allows for an aligning of the candidate with the hostages without specifically referring to the situation in Iran at all, visually and verbally reinforcing within the memory of the viewer that wives can and should speak for husbands in peril. Nancy Reagan is even using the same rhetorical tactic as Mrs. Morefield, frequent Nightline guest. The unspoken message here is that the marital relationship confers upon it a particular right to invoke expertise and influence in a public forum. In a \textit{New York Times} article published on October 25, 1980, the Reagan campaign positioned Nancy as the key driver behind the spot; her anger was the impetus for its production:

Mr. Reagan's aides said that the candidate's wife recorded the advertisement on Thursday in a New York studio at her request because she had been stung by the accusations against her husband. "I don't often speak out in campaigns but I think this campaign now has gotten to the point and the level where I have to say something," Mrs. Reagan says at the start of the advertisement.\textsuperscript{126}


The *New York Times* quote allows her to recognize that her statements, indeed her visibility, are potentially inappropriate for a woman and a wife, especially one who may become the First Lady of the nation. Her transgressions are only appropriate and acceptable in a particular frame of defense of the family in peril. Her remarks dovetail with the national discourse surrounding the perception of men under attack, requiring the defense of wives. That said, analysis of the transcript reveals that Mrs. Reagan is doing more than responding to accusations against her husband. She is specifically calling out Carter (by name) for his response to the situation in Iran. “I would like to have him explain the vacillating, weak foreign policy so that our friends overseas don't know what we're going to do, whether we're going to stand up for them, or whether we're not going to stand up for them,” she demands. Mrs. Reagan’s feminine intervention was only required because of the masculine failures of leadership on the part of the current administration. She had to step outside of the confines of gendered behavior, just as Mrs. Morefield did, because of the weakness, the unspoken-of impotence, of the President. Though this spot is but one example of an alignment of Reagan with the hostages, it serves as reminder that the crisis in Iran significantly underpinned campaign communications. The undergirding gendered narratives and representations of masculinity and femininity were consistent across communications platforms, whether in the paid media of campaign communications or the supposedly objective news pieces produced by network television.

Those commercials where Reagan speaks for himself evoke the same contrast of masculinity between himself and Carter. His campaign tagline “Peace through Strength”
situates the nation’s current status as the inverse: conflict through weakness. Though he never directly calls Jimmy Carter “weak,” he alludes to the president in his campaign communications. A spot voiced by a male narrator declares, “Jimmy Carter still doesn't know that it takes strong leadership to keep the peace. Weak leadership will lose it.”

Another thirty-second spot, titled “Peace through Strength,” the candidate declares “History has taught us only too well, that tyrants are tempted only when the forces of freedom are weak, not when they're strong.” This juxtaposition of weakness and strength must be considered against the backdrop of the Iranian Hostage Crisis, as well as to the perceived decade-long attacks on American masculinity described by Zaretsky and McAlister. Reagan’s assertion that strength is the answer to redemption is the solution to Carter’s, and America’s, weakness and impotence.

While the Republican campaign articulated the conflation of strength with masculinity, it also made moves to solidify women within traditional gender roles that were marginally subverted due to feminist women’s activism in the 1970s. Not coincidentally, it was the Republican Convention of 1980 that marked a dramatic shift in the Republican Party’s position on significant women’s rights issues. This convention saw the adjustment of the party’s official platform to endorse an anti-abortion plank for the first time, noting “There can be no doubt that the question of abortion, despite the complex nature of its various issues, is ultimately concerned with equality of rights under the law. While we recognize differing views on this question among Americans in general—and in our own Party—we affirm our support of a constitutional amendment to

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restore protection of the right to life for unborn children. We also support the Congressional efforts to restrict the use of taxpayers' dollars for abortion.” The party’s platform also confirmed an official removal of support for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) under the guise of states’ rights, claiming “Ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment is now in the hands of state legislatures, and the issues of the time extension and rescission are in the courts. The states have a constitutional right to accept or reject a constitutional amendment without federal interference or pressure. At the direction of the White House, federal departments launched pressure against states which refused to ratify ERA. Regardless of one's position on ERA, we demand that this practice cease." 129

Reagan, as de facto head of the Republican Party, understood that these two landmark changes in the party platform would communicate with voters an investment in traditional gender roles. The convergence of these policy shifts, along with the “Peace through Strength” campaign solidifies Reagan’s position as the candidate that would restore American masculinity, both at home and abroad. That restoration of masculinity would also create a space for a more succinctly defined femininity, the desire for which was made manifest in the political activism of conservative women of this era. If masculinity was threatened, what could be said of femininity? The discourse surrounding gender roles in the late 1970s cannot be ignored, particularly for conservative women. As detailed in Mansbridge’s seminal account of the movement, American women that never considered themselves to be political actors were mobilized by conservative activists like

Phyllis Schlafly.\textsuperscript{130} From early in the decade, Schlafly argued that the ERA would erase supposed protections women enjoyed, such as alimony or exclusion from conscripted military service. As much as self-identified feminists wanted to bring women’s voices out of the domestic space and into the public arena, there was not a monolithic ideology concerning appropriate female behavior. Mansbridge asks and answers the question, “Why did states stop ratifying in 1973? Why did public support in the unratified states begin to decline? The campaign against the ERA succeeded because it shifted debate away from equal rights and focused it on the possibility that the ERA might bring substantive changes in women’s roles and behavior.”\textsuperscript{131} In an era of upheaval and uncertainty, adherence to the supposed “natural” roles and behaviors of men and women offered assurance and continuity, not only of a future but a future comparable to the past but intelligible to voters in the present. The voices of women, particularly those that were concerned with womanly pursuits, like ensuring the welfare of their family, like Mrs. Morefield, Mrs. Kennedy, and the other wives of the hostages, or Phyllis Schlafly, concerned that women be drafted into a military role that is in conflict with their essential peaceful nature, or left unable to secure financial support from a man, were given merit and space within the public discourse. I would argue that their voices, with their specifically maternalist positionality, simultaneously construct and reinscribe an intelligible femininity while defending a masculinity perceived to be under attack at home and abroad.

The issue of the ERA came up in a televised debate held between the two candidates on October 28, 1980, within a week of the election. Ironically, the debate was

\textsuperscript{130} Mansbridge, Jane. \textit{Why We Lost the ERA} Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid. 20
hosted by the League of Women Voters. One of the panelists, television journalist
Barbara Walters, asked both Reagan and Carter what their opponent’s greatest weakness
was. While Carter discussed Reagan’s nuclear armament program, Reagan focused on
Carter’s investment in federalized social government programs, and the possibility of
increased taxation. When Carter was given the opportunity to rebut Reagan, he
immediately focused on the ERA, and the shift in the Republican position. As the
interchange between the two demonstrates, Carter positions himself as an advocate to
women, while Reagan erases women’s inequitable status from the argument entirely,
instead focusing on the legislative aspects of the would-be amendment:

CARTER: I mention the radical departure of Governor Reagan from the
principles or ideals or historical perspective of his own party. I don't think
this can be better illustrated than in the case with guaranteeing women equal
rights under the Constitution of our nation. For forty years the Republican
Party platforms called for guaranteeing women equal rights with a
Constitutional amendment. Six predecessors of mine who served in the Oval
Office called for this guarantee of women's rights. Governor Reagan and the
new Republican Party has departed from this commitment--a very severe
blow to the opportunity for women finally to correct discrimination under
which they have suffered. When a man and a woman do the same amount of
work, a man gets paid a dollar, a woman only gets paid 59 cents. And the
equal rights amendment only says that equality of rights shall not be abridged
for women by the federal government or by the state governments. That's all
it says--a simple guarantee of equality of opportunity, which typifies the
Democratic Party and which is a very important commitment of mine, as
contrasted with Governor Reagan's radical departure from the long-standing
policy of his own party.

Moderator: Governor Reagan.

REAGAN: Mr. President, once again, I happen to be against the amendment
because I think the amendment will take this problem out of the hands of
elected legislators and put it in the hands of unelected judges. I am for equal
rights, and while you have been in office for four years and not one single
state, and most of them have a majority of Democratic legislators, has added
to the ratification or voted to ratify the equal rights amendment. While I was
governor more than eight years ago, I found fourteen separate instances
where women were discriminated against in the body of California law and I
had passed and signed into law fourteen statutes that eliminated those
discriminations, including the economic ones that you have just mentioned,
equal pay and so forth. I believe that if in all these years that we've spent
trying to get the amendment, that we'd spent as much time correcting these
laws as we did in California--and we were the first to do it. If I were
president I would also now take a look at the hundreds of federal regulations
which discriminate against women and which go right on while everyone is
looking for an amendment. I would have someone ride herd on those
regulations, and we'd start eliminating those discriminations in the federal
government against women.

Note that while Reagan does not completely negate the idea that women could need equal
protection legislation, he cannot articulate what the inequities may be (“equal pay and so
forth”) and notes that he would appoint “someone” to “ride herd” on the issue. With
concern to women, the Reagan campaign of 1980 focused only on areas of women’s
difference (their reproductive capacity) from, not their equality to, men. While this may
seem a minor distinction, it draws an important distinction about constructions of women
as political actors. When their voices and agency are positioned as an extension of their
naturalized maternal role, they are acceptable within the conservative paradigm. When
those voices reach toward an actualization outside of the construct of the heteronormative
nuclear family, their demands are deemed unimportant.

The National Organization for Women notes that exit polls on election day show
that for the first time ever recorded, men and women voted quite differently in the race,
stating that men backed Reagan by a 56-36% edge, but women split their votes 47-45%.
Pollsters later indicated that for women, the issue of women's rights and ERA had a
significant impact on their votes. The failure of the ERA brought about by these moves
against women’s rights had an important impact on feminist developments in the 1980s
and beyond: “Feminism’s intellectual remaking after the end of the 1970s was partly a
story of political stalemate and opposition. Ratification of the ERA, which had seemed a foregone conclusion to most public opinion pollsters, was blocked in the outstanding states, one by one, by the newly mobilized counterfeminist organizations. When the extended ratification deadline for the ERA elapsed in 1982, feminism’s broadest common plank gave way.  

As will be discussed, this setback brought about by the election of Ronald Reagan still has influence today.

Carter the Failure, Reagan the Redeemer: American Masculinity Retrieved

Ronald Reagan went on to a sweeping victory in 1980, winning just over 50% of the popular vote, and 90% of the electoral vote. Academics, across multiple disciplines, have critiqued the Reagan administration in contrast to that of Jimmy Carter. Though not all have focused on a gender critique, representations of masculinity, either failed or successful, have played a central role in the consideration of these candidacies. Carter, in simple words, was a failure at meeting national demands of masculinity, and by extension, leadership. Political scientist John Orman’s book, Comparing Presidential Behavior: Carter, Reagan, and the Macho Presidential Style sums up the many contrasts between the two men’s presentation of leadership style, and evokes many of the symbologies addressed above. But perhaps this one passage sums up most succinctly the ways that Carter, both his personal behaviors and his leadership style, embodied the accusations of impotence so often levied at him:

Carter often gave the appearance of being too emotional for a macho presidency. He cried in public on occasions when he was extremely happy or when he attended funerals. He also talked of love and compassion as he pushed a human rights foreign policy early in his international rhetoric. …Carter did not appear as a strong or aggressive president. He kept the

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United States out of military involvement in Angola, Iran during the revolution, and Nicaragua, for example. He was perceived by some as the president who let the Soviets push him around and as a president who allowed militant terrorists to embarrass the United States in Teheran. President Carter perpetually presented himself as acted upon, not an agent of action, not only in behavior but in rhetoric from the beginning of his tenure as president, from his choice of verbs in his inaugural address to a his flat tone of voice. Some have argued that the Carter administration was almost complicit in its own demasculinization.

“In effect, President Carter, with the collaboration of the mass media, helped turn the American hostages into a symbol of the entire nation. Like the individuals imprisoned in Iran, the American nation as a whole had been captured—with few options open to it, but to implore its captors to let it go.”

Recall, within the popular discourse, the president alone was not impotent, nor were the men in captivity; the whole nation suffered from the condition. The Carter presidency was damaging not just to the nation but also to perceptions of the office itself. Carter’s perceived failures resulted in an impotence that contaminated both the nation and its infrastructure. It took Reagan, and his splashy inaugural, frequent visits to his horse ranch, and his “flag-waving patriotism” to retrieve the status of the office itself.

The connections between subverted masculinity and the family cannot be forgotten. As demonstrated in the Iranian Hostage crisis, this symbolism was nothing new to the American viewing public, and in fact supported the growing anxieties about the security of the American nuclear family. “The scene of the drama had shifted from South

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East Asia to the Middle East, and the North Vietnamese communist adversary had been replaced by Iranian militants, but the crime was the same: the enemy had managed to wound America in its most vital, vulnerable, secret space.” This geographic and chronological tracking of this narrative links easily to Susan Jeffords' analysis of films in the 1980s, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*. The book anchors film thematics to widely held conceptions of appropriate American manhood, supposedly retrieved from the failures of the Carter administration. Reagan made his mark by specifically by being what Carter was not. She writes:

Ronald Reagan was able to capture both of these roles, to portray himself as both a “real man” and a “real president,” as both a father and a king. For this reason he was able to foster what many have come to recognize a revolution in U.S. social organization and to implement clear-cut policies – both foreign and domestic—that would define the nation’s identity and agenda for the next eight years. It was a revolution defined by what it was not. It was not Jimmy Carter, or the Carter policies, which it rewrote as weak, defeatist, inactive, and feminine. Consequently, it was a revolution whose success pivoted on the ability of Ronald Reagan and his administration to portray themselves successfully as distinctly masculine, not merely as men but as decisive, tough, aggressive, strong and domineering men…Ronald Reagan would become the premiere masculine archetype for the 1980s, embodying both national and individual images of manliness that came to underlie the nation's identity during his eight years in office.

Scholars should not ignore the multiple ways that the Reagan campaigns of both 1980 and 1984 leveraged their candidate's status as a symbol of masculine strength, and eventually virility, to garner votes and secure support in the general election. Though his popularity would fluctuate throughout the early 1980s, he entered the election cycle of 1984 on an upswing. While the campaign of 1980 focused on the failures of the incumbent, the re-election campaign would focus on how Reagan has provided a solution

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137 Zaretsky, pg. 35.
to the problems supposedly created by his predecessor. The nation’s weakness and subverted masculinity was not successfully retrieved with the release of the hostages from Iran, though that event was credited to Reagan’s supposed “peace through strength” ideology. It was not regained simply through the “macho presidential style” that Orman describes, or Jeffords’ depiction of the administration’s aggressive foreign policies. Instead, I argue that ideological American masculinity was salvaged through the symbolic reproduction of American children, visibly displayed in the re-election campaign of 1984. Accusations of impotence could not be levied at a president or a nation with the demonstrable masculinity made manifest in the bodies of the nation’s children. Simultaneously, this reconstruction of American masculinity allowed for an affirmation of traditional femininity desirable to long-standing Reagan supporters as well as intelligible to a public yearning for stability. The next section will discuss the multiple methods by which Ronald Reagan’s re-election campaign communicated the reclamation of white, American masculinity, particularly through the symbolic positioning or absence of the child and the heteronormative nuclear family.

Reagan as National Father: Advocate for the Unborn

It is impossible to avoid consideration of the multiple ways that the Reagan campaigns of both 1980 and 1984 leveraged their candidate's status as a symbol of masculine strength, and eventually virility, to garner votes and secure support in the general election. As previously noted, the Republican Party officially declared opposition to legalized abortion at the national convention in July 1980. Reagan articulated his
opposition to abortion in a debate with independent candidate John Anderson in September 1980: “I think all of us should have a respect for innocent life. With regard to the freedom of the individual for choice with regard to abortion, there's one individual who's not being considered at all. That's the one who is being aborted. And I've noticed that everybody that is for abortion has already been born.” However, the issue was not at the forefront of the contest between Reagan and Carter in 1980. Abortion was discussed with greater fervor in subsequent years. One particular piece of communication emerging in the transition period offers a bridge between the two campaigns. While not necessarily notable in and of itself, the subject matter of Reagan’s “Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation” is a strange fusion of manifesto and skewed history lesson. Written and published in 1983 on the 10th anniversary of the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision, the essay employs familiar right-to-life considerations of when life begins, where states’ rights lie, and the universal value of every life. The author compares legalized abortion to slavery and the Holocaust, and claims, “The pressing issue of infanticide which, as we have seen, flows inevitably from permissive abortion as another step in the denial of the inviolability of human life.” As of this writing, Ronald Reagan stands alone as the only sitting president to publish an essay that would be included in a published book, but there is something more significant to Reagan’s piece. His clear position on this polarizing issue could have been a political misstep; though it echoes sentiments of the candidates’ base, the sentiment had the potential to alienate voters either undecided or on the other side of the issue.

This risk raises the question: why would Reagan feel compelled to release this

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essay in January 1983, knowing that it had the potential to be held against him in the
upcoming election? In keeping with the narrative constructed by the campaign of 1980,
Reagan intends to promise American voters strength and national futurity, not impotence
and its attendant sterility. Aborted pregnancies circumvent this narrative of national
futurity. Michel Foucault lends an instructive lens with which to consider Reagan’s
investment in the abortion debate. “Sex was a means of access both to the life of the body
and the life of the species…But one also sees it becoming the theme of political
operations, economic interventions (through incitements to or curbs on procreation) and
ideological campaigns for raising standards of morality and responsibility: it was put
forward as the index of a society’s strength, revealing both its political energy and
biological vigor.”¹⁴⁰ Reagan’s essay (and subsequent 1984 campaign communications)
demonstrates this striving toward the alignment of politics and biology. Accusations of
sterility are impossible when juxtaposed to images of children. A nation that allegedly
placed primacy on “life” is a nation focused on the future, instead of one that fails at
meeting external challenges from foreign adversaries.

Condemning abortion places primary consideration on the resulting child, erasing
the agency of the mother, with the perceived insurance of national futurity. The future of
the nation, or as Reagan would consider, life itself, is carried in the bodies of American
women. This public appropriation indicates that women’s bodies are not truly their own,
but only tools, incubators to be manipulated at the national directive and discarded once
their service has been provided. While this may seem a strident analysis, scholars have
noted that the notion that women are biologically and morally tasked with reproduction is
not necessarily considered to be a diminished social role. Lisa McGirr's Suburban

Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right provides a thorough consideration of the rise of the modern conservative political movement through the lens of the middle class whites that settled in Orange County, California. She describes the women behind the grassroots organizing that built the John Birch Society and other such groups, which certainly embraced a Christian religiosity they considered to be in opposition to abortion rights. McGirr notes that for this cohort this religiosity aligned neatly with the proposition that women and men had separate and natural roles to play in the family, and that any option to divert from these roles disturbed not only the social fabric, but their place within it. As McGirr notes, "In religious conservatives' eyes, it was part of a broader mentality that flouted the law of God by seeking to deny biological realities…The interplay of antifeminism and pro-life issues was evident in the trajectories of activists who organized against both abortion and equal right causes, and in join "pro-family" and "pro-life" initiatives.141 These women, and others like them, fell clearly into what would be considered Reagan’s base, and also align with Mansbridge’s assessment about why conservative women would be against the passage of the ERA. Instead of viewing their gender as a marginalizing force in their lives, they embrace its supposed natural responsibilities and its influence on social order. As the Reagan administration sought to construct a sense of retrieved American masculine strength damaged as a result of the Iran Hostage crisis, the result also yielded a clearly defined appropriate femininity, one that meets its natural role through reproduction. Operating under an easily understood gender binary, if men had a role to play in the world it was as a defender of American freedom, for women, then, that role was that of a mother, in or beyond the home.

President Reagan’s essay clearly vilifies those who would choose to have an abortion and stray away from naturally assigned roles. “Regrettably, we live at a time when some persons do not value all human life. They want to pick and choose which individuals have value. Some have said that only those with consciousness of self are human beings.” Obviously, the President of the United States is singling out those who would have legally sanctioned abortions performed, unlabeled here as women, as vile and un-American, easily compared to Nazis and slaveholders. Critical theorist Lauren Berlant addressed this odd piece of propaganda: “In this essay, Reagan characteristically positions himself as an outsider to the official nation of which he is president; citing the heroic precedents of Dred Scott and Abraham Lincoln… In Reagan’s account, the abortion saturated nation of the present tense is in an antagonistic relation to another, essentially real genealogy of American heroism, global culture, science, morality, experience and, of course to the abstraction “life” itself.”

To extend her argument, it must be acknowledged that is these women who would have an abortion that are situated as well as outside of the American narrative that the Reagan administration is trying to create. By exercising legally approved control and agency over their own bodies, they are in violation of this national genealogy, and outside of the narrative of reproductive citizenship Reagan is attempting to create. As Berlant writes, “In pro-life discourse, the aim of national reproduction merges with the claim that fetuses, like all persons, ought to have a politically protected right to natural development.”

She refers to serves as a potent antidote to accusations of impotence and sterility so problematic to the president’s predecessor.

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143 Ibid. 100
Though it has been discussed whether or not Reagan actually wrote the essay alone or if others were involved, it was published under his byline alone. Therefore, it must be assumed that the President of the United States was fully invested in each claim, as well as the inferences, included in the essay. The uniqueness of the essay has prompted political scientists to consider why the sitting president of the United States felt compelled to attach his name to an essay addressing such a polarizing position. Though some felt that it was an effort to clearly solidify the evangelical voting block, others have noted that this cohort was already firmly in the Republican camp. A survey of registered voters in the first week of October 1984 noted that only four percent of respondents would change their vote because they did not agree with the candidate’s stance on abortion. While this kind of hindsight would have been impossible during the campaign, there is nothing to indicate that conservative voters would move toward a pro-choice Democrat and away from the incumbent Republican.

Still, the ongoing insistence upon adherence to traditional gender roles does not lose its relevance, in spite of the reclaimed American strength and masculinity gained with the ouster of the impotent prior president. Kristin Luker’s seminal work on the rise of the pro-life movement, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, describes the underpinnings of the activists’ ideologies through a series of interviews conducted during the early 1980s. Her findings detail these individuals’ religious beliefs, as well as their attitudes about contemporary social structure. Through this ethnographic approach, she notes that the pro-life community typically sees the world as “inherently divided both

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emotionally and socially into a male sphere and a female sphere.”  

Further, this community of pro-life women perceives legalized access to abortion as a disruption of this naturalized balance between the genders because “abortion formally diminishes male decision-making power.” I argue that this diminution of masculine power, though not precisely articulated in Reagan’s essay or his position against abortion rights, figured strongly into his consideration of the issue. Though couched in valorous language defending the unborn, it is this placement of power in the hands of women that works to trouble a nation still struggling to retrieve a national masculinity wounded on the international stage. Additionally, for women who have gained power and agency through a maternalist identity, they would be reluctant to devalue it.

This stance on the abortion debate is intrinsically invested in the symbolic value of the unborn and does not generally engage in this significant point of contention: the right of a woman to choose to terminate a pregnancy subverts a man’s domination of her, both bodily and politically. Foucault and Berlant’s discussions of the political symbolism imbued in sex and pregnancy provide a useful frame of consideration, and Luker’s contention yields another: woman’s right to make this decision removes man’s power to enforce reproduction. This lack of masculine control evokes exactly the kind of “impotence” pinned upon the Carter administration during the Iran Hostage Crisis: the inability to force one’s will upon another. It is this loss of power that challenges traditional masculinity as well as subverts the traditional femininity that lies at the center of the debate for actors on both sides of the abortion debate.

146 Ibid. 162
What was the result of Reagan’s “Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation”?

The publication of Reagan’s essay was significant to those within the anti-abortion rights movement not only as a symbolic act, but also as a galvanizing moment for wider audiences. “Reagan gave the pro-life movement a figure to rally around, and it did just that. When, over fourteen years after Reagan left office, President George W. Bush signed legislation on November 5, 2003, banning partial-birth abortion, many conservatives saw it as victory that was the culmination of efforts starting with Reagan. The next day, Fred Barnes’ [conservative columnist for the Wall Street Journal] bestowed on Reagan the title of “father of the pro-life movement.” Yet Barnes’ commentary provides an insight into the impact of Reagan’s stance on the abortion debate, and notes the impact of the essay as well as his candidacy.

Why did Mr. Reagan's take on abortion matter so much? Because he was not only president but also the undisputed leader of America's conservatives. He defined conservatism. Not every conservative agreed with him, but most did. And President Reagan, says Mr. Hyde, "gave the right to life position stature and legitimacy." In 1976, the Republican platform had a lukewarm plank on abortion that praised foes of Roe v. Wade. Without Mr. Reagan's having to ask, the 1980 platform backed a constitutional amendment banning abortion. Since then, the pro-life stance has scarcely been debated and never seriously challenged at Republican conventions.

The publication of “Abortion and the National Conscience” offers a prelude to the re-election campaign of 1984. As a writer, Reagan has rhetorically positioned himself as an advocate for the unborn children of America. As a presidential candidate, his campaign would position him as a redeemer of American pride and strength. Now considered the father of the pro-life movement, he would become the father of all Americans, symbolically providing safety and succor in a previously, but now untroubled national

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landscape. As will be made apparent through an analysis of the campaign commercials of both candidates, dueling narratives of children in paradise and children in peril would mark this election in ways previously unseen.

**Rebirth and Redemption: Reagan’s Morning in America**

Visual imagery of political candidates with children is certainly nothing groundbreaking, yet the Reagan campaign of 1984 made a pivot away from traditional representations of children and youth in political campaign commercials. The most well-known of these commercials is the Johnson campaign’s “Daisy Girl” spot of 1964, featuring visuals of a young girl interspersed with nuclear explosions. Another good example is Richard Nixon’s 1972 “Child’s Face” spot, featuring quick intercut images of young children of a variety of gender and ethnicity. The voice over text, read by President Nixon, is as follows:

> I see the face of a child. What his color is, what his ancestry is, doesn't matter. What does matter is he's an American child. That child is more important than any politician's promise. He is everything we've ever hoped to be, and everything we dare to dream to be. This child must not have his dream become a living nightmare of poverty, neglect, and despair. He must not be the victim of a system that feeds his stomach, but starves his soul. I ask you to help me make the American dream come true for those to whom it seems an impossible dream today.  

While previous campaigns depicted children in peril, the campaign of 1984 showed children as happy and healthy citizens, untroubled by the burdens of poverty, urban decay or war that plagued previous generations of youth.

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One of the most noted spots from Reagan’s 1984 campaign is officially titled “Prouder, Stronger, Better,” but it has become popularly known as “Morning in America.” This sixty-second commercial serves as the cornerstone for the re-election campaign, and has been analyzed by scholars of political communications for its innovative marketing techniques. However, consideration of the implicit gender dynamics is often neglected in light of a technical analysis of video style and soundtrack.

An examination of the script reveals multiple narratives at play:

MALE NARRATOR: It’s morning again in America. Today, more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country’s history. With interest rates at about half the record highs of 1980, nearly 2,000 families today will buy new homes, more than at any time in the past four years. This afternoon, 6,500 young men and women will be married. And with inflation at less than half of what it was just four years ago, they can look forward with confidence to the future. It’s morning again in America. And, under the leadership of President Reagan, our country is prouder and stronger and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?

TITLE CARD: President Reagan

There is a perception that the “Morning in America” campaign was new and innovative, functioning differently than other presidential television campaigns, while simultaneously producing a feeling of nostalgia for an era gone by. “Filmed in the small Victorian towns of … Northern California, there is some concession to the realities of 1980s politics, with narration that refers to lower interest rates and inflation. But the voiceover is clearly secondary to the feel-good video that includes a wedding, a family moving into a new home, and people hoisting American flag. The team’s media director, Doug Watts, said


in an internal memo the ad was targeted at the ‘slightly upscale voter’ who had done well under Reagan.” 151 Others have noted the production values of this set of commercials were what set it apart from previous campaign spots. “The slickness was a conscious decision,” yielding a commercial produced by an advertising team that created Michael Jackson’s Pepsi commercials and singing cats of Meow Mix fame. 152

Another thirty-second spot in the campaign, simply titled “Inflation,” also compares the current economic status to that of 1980. In the beginning of the ad, the screen is filled with images of rust and decay: a combine rusting in a field, a grey, empty shop floor. Yet as the candidate begins to speak, the images change:

REAGAN: This was America in 1980: a nation that wasn't working. Interest rates were at an all-time high; inflation was at its highest in sixty-five years. So, we rolled up our sleeves and showed that working together, there's nothing we can't do. Today, interest rates are down, inflation is down. Americans are working again, and so is America. And we'll carry on, unafraid, unashamed, and unsurpassed.


The visual images shift to show shimmering golden wheat fields, combines rolling, cars being assembled in a factory, and houses being built. Burly workers throw grain into the back of a pick-up truck and wipe the sweat from their brow. While the above text described what the commercial contained, it is also important to mention those that were not included: women and men of color. Each worker featured was white, and the only woman included in the spot was seen carrying a shopping bag, walking behind what is presumably her husband. It is not difficult to argue that those that are “unafraid,

unashamed, and unsurpassed” are the working class white men that were supposedly suffering under the reign of the previous administration. It would not have been difficult to find images of working women to include, office workers, teachers, etc., but would their inclusion have detracted from the representation of retrieved masculine American strength so recently challenged? The masculinity retrieved is specifically that which had been subverted in the international and domestic conflicts of the 1970s. The lack of racial diversity in the images of American workers is telling. As will be discussed, those included in Reagan’s vision of a better America seems to be a relatively limited population.

The 1984 Reagan campaign promised a future unfettered by the problems of the past, with clearly defined roles for American workers and their families. However, those who might not readily identify with either the moniker of “worker” or “family” was omitted from the campaign, as well as from the president’s notion of an America that was “unafraid, unashamed and unsurpassed.” Instead, women and children, particularly those of color, were ignored by the campaign and rhetorically shamed in the president’s speeches and policy decisions that deemed them pathologically outside of this artificially constructed framework. Reagan’s propagation of marriage as the idealized foundation for American families lessens the value of those who would not or could not become married, while simultaneously elevating the status of those who are married.

While the “Morning in America” campaign may have been new in its production values, I argue that the content of this spot was new in ways not fully addressed in other analyses. Though the techniques employed to sell consumer products may have seemed revolutionary when deployed to promote the candidacy of an incumbent world leader, the
narrative is quite familiar territory. White weddings, nuclear families consuming property and services, and a token representation of diversity in the form of a non-threatening African American child (featured in the spot “Peace”) do little to disrupt dominant notions of American propriety. As previously noted, the spot in particular was intended to appeal to those who had fared well under the administration’s policies, not those abused or neglected by them.

A voice over inquires, “Under the leadership of President Reagan, our country is prouder and stronger and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?” Yet who is the “we” that this campaign is purporting to speak for? This supposed strength is represented in the expressions of a very specific gender and class performance, that of the white, heterosexual reproductive family. American masculinity has been retrieved from “where we were” during the previous, impotent administration. The usage of the metaphor of “morning” is also worthy of analysis. Evoking a rebirth, a new era fresh from the taint of the previous administration, the commercial attempts to situate his administration as somehow apart from the past, invested in an ongoing futurity. The script also declares that it is morning” again,” as though the possibility of futurity exists now; there were not mornings during the previous administration. Where once Americans were categorized as impotent, incapable of the necessary strength or fortitude to protect its far-flung citizen children or its’ standing in the world, Reagan has created an America invested in reproduction and genesis, with possibility of redemption and rebirth.

Yet this redemption of American masculinity, with its concomitant articulation of American femininity was not an inclusive one. As is apparent from policy decisions as
well as campaign speeches and other communications, Reagan’s ideal American child was one that was produced under a particular set of circumstances, namely as the result of a heterosexual marriage with a father located securely as the head of household. Additionally, though his rhetoric never explicitly excludes African Americans and other people of color, I would argue that Reagan’s ongoing racialized vilification of women and children on welfare and his administration’s campaign against teenage pregnancy clearly demonstrates a racialized ideology about what an acceptable American child should look like. Though children are required to ensure American futurity, retrieve masculinity and define femininity, only a particular kind of child will fill the bill. In the next section, a discussion of Reagan’s use of the term “welfare queen,” the administration’s campaign to reform welfare and to eliminate the “teen pregnancy crisis” reveals the administration’s commitment to a particularly racialized futurity.

“Stronger, Prouder and Better” : Race and The Idealized Child

As scholars across disciplines have come to understand, discussions of poverty and the “undeserving poor” have been racialized, such that even the term “welfare” brings about an immediate connection to the African-American community, even though there is no statistical substantiation that the majority of aid recipients are black. Research has shown that the politics of welfare and welfare reform are racialized. Survey analysis charting public opinion about the supposed identities and behaviors of recipients of federal and state aid, as well as the programs themselves, clearly reveal a strong public belief that recipients of aid are not only minorities, but that this belief was the result of language used by political leaders as well as by mass media representation. Sociologist Martin Gilens argues, “Although political elites typically use race-neutral language in
discussing poverty and welfare, it is now widely believed that welfare is a ‘race-coded’
topic that evokes racial imagery and attitudes even when racial minorities are not
explicitly mentioned.”  

Gilens attributes this racialization to historically held stereotypes, but also to more recent evocations of raced identities, attributable directly to Ronald Reagan and the creation of the mythical “welfare queen.” Reagan began referring to the welfare queen in stump speeches and radio addresses in 1976, his term for an African-American, Chicago-area single mother that had criminally defrauded the system to the tune of over $100,000 by using false names and documentation. She supposedly drove a Cadillac and brazenly wore a mink coat. This anecdote about one woman was used to illustrate a corrupt system, but also serves as the seed of a narrative that would inform the voting public.

Much scholarship illustrates the ways that the welfare debate has been raced, but does not adequately address the impact of gender on the discussion. Ange-Marie Hancock argues for an intersectional consideration of the welfare queen, “The development of the welfare queen public identity has been shaped by inegalitarian traditions of racism, sexism and classism from the dark side of an American political culture of freedom and rugged individualism. The “welfare queen” public identity…has two organizing dimensions, hyperfertility and laziness.” Within the public imagination, welfare programs encourage recipients to avoid marriage and to have more children in order to secure a larger benefit check. While hyperfertility might be considered to be desirable in a nation struggling to demonstrate a return to strength and

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155 CHICAGO NEWSPAPER CITATION
futurity, the children that are the products of these mothers fall outside of this paradigm, perhaps because they are not easily connected to a male figure that would gain increased masculinity and patriarchal authority. Wahneema Lubiano links the lack of father with the dismissal of those women on welfare, as well as their offspring: “Welfare queen is a phrase that describes economic dependency—the lack of a job and/or income (which equals degeneracy in the United States); the presence of a child or children with no father and/or no husband (moral deviance); and finally, a charge on the collective U.S. Treasury—a human debt.”

While the Reagan administration undertook efforts to reform social welfare programs that purportedly resulted in an abundance of children, it also sought to attack what it deemed the crisis in teenage pregnancy. Kristin Luker argues that there was a racial component in this “crisis” as well; again, perceptions held that those who got pregnant while young were generally African American, the phenomenon was potentially polluting a population of otherwise would-be national mothers, white women. She provides a historic framework that discusses the statistical rise of teenage pregnancy, and notes that the 1980s was not actually a time when this reality increased. Instead, it was a time when teens, particularly whites, became pregnant but did not marry. “The debate, in centering on teenagers in general, thus combined two contrasting features of American society: it permitted people to talk about African Americans and poor women (categories that often overlapped) without mentioning race or class; but it also reflected the fact that the sexual behavior and reproductive patterns of white teenagers were beginning to resemble those of African Americans and poorer women—that is, more and

more whites were postponing marriage and having babies out of wedlock.”¹⁵⁸ It is this subversion of male authority that pushes these mothers and children outside of the idealized paradigm of American futurity. Ronald Reagan’s opinions about the primacy of marriage and patriarchal leadership are illustrated vividly in a May 9, 1979 radio address speech in which he discussed sex education classes in schools. He first addressed a New Jersey law that lowers the age of consent for sexual intercourse to age thirteen, and dismisses it as ridiculous. He quoted a child’s reaction to the law to support his opinion: “God bless the wisdom that often goes with youth. An eighth grader said, ‘I’m against the law. A lot of kids who didn’t do it before are going to try it now. It’s like giving them permission. And if they get pregnant, who’s going to marry a thirteen year old?’”¹⁵⁹ Though spoken by an unidentified child (thereby obscuring gender), Reagan clearly considered marriageability as a key factor in the teenage pregnancy “crisis.” A family functioning without a male head of household, as noted by Lubiano, is dysfunctional and outside of the gender structure so intrinsic to the administration’s vision of retrieved national strength and security, and it is impossible to neglect the role of race and gender in this political agenda.

Considering Reagan’s status as an incumbent in 1984, it would be easy to dismiss the representations of happy children as only a comment on the successes of the past four years, and not as a larger narrative of retrieved masculinity and dominance. Yet previous incumbent’s campaigns inclusion of children in their television ad’s still were forward looking, concerned with pursuing further solutions to social problems as opposed to celebrating those problems as already solved. The candidacies of prior incumbents like

¹⁵⁸ Kristen Luker’s Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy. Pg. 86
Eisenhower in 1956 and Nixon in 1972 were focused thematically on the successes of their administration, and the notion that they required another four years to maintain the status quo. In contrast, the rhetoric of the Reagan campaign evoked fear of backsliding into the darkness of the Carter administration, as opposed to moving forward. This campaign was pivoting away from the use of traditional tropes. “In 1984, Reagan’s ads appealed to fears about the economy by reflecting on the economic situation of the country at the conclusion of the Carter administration…According to the visual rhetoric of this spot, America in 1980 was a darkly lit place devoid of people. On the other hand, 1984 is filled with busy Americans and bathed in glowing, colorful light. The ad encourages Americans to keep moving forward and stipulates that “we cannot waste the genius of one mind.”\textsuperscript{160} The solution to American anxieties about retreating into Carter’s America, a hostile place devoid of humanity, sterile, even, is the re-election of national rescuer Ronald Reagan.

This transition of positioning children as vulnerable victims of American circumstance stands in stark opposition to the smiling boys and girls of Ronald Reagan’s America. Children in the Reagan campaign of 1984 served as more than symbols of national prosperity. I argue that they also represent a reclaimed fertility and fecundity, retrieved from the impotence of the Carter administration. The children present in these advertisements as well as the showcasing of the white, heterosexual newlywed couple provide demonstrable evidence that the nation is fulfilling its preordained role as a player in the reproductive family. In contrast, Mondale’s use of children in his campaign spots was much more in line with commercials of the past. The Democrat’s team produced a

lengthy film, over four minutes long, featuring young, white children dancing and frolicking to the sound of Crosby, Stills, Nash’s folksy song "Teach Your Children." The images quickly intercut to missiles being launched from silos, then back to the children’s confused faces. The clip goes on to include a segment of John F. Kennedy speaking on disarmament, with a male narrator intoning, “Killer weapons in space, layer upon layer, orbiting, with a response time so short, there will be no time to wake a president. Kennedy's hotline will be obsolete. Computers will take control. The cost: a trillion dollars. And Reagan plans to turn over the technology to the Russians. Mondale won't.”

Mondale followed the footsteps of other campaigns, clearly with little success. His candidacy produced the biggest landslide victory for Ronald Reagan in the U.S. election history. Mondale’s representation of children in peril, while familiar territory for viewers, fell flat in juxtaposition to tranquility and strength. Like a benevolent father, aiming to please his children as well as protect and provide for them, Reagan’s America is filled with prosperity in stark contrast to what was experienced under the weakness of Carter, and his surrogate stand-in in 1984, Walter Mondale. As Diamond and Bates noted, “Mondale was promising April 15 for everyone, Reagan offered up Christmas morning with bright presents under the tree.”

Significantly, it should be noted that a quantitative analysis of television advertisements released by the Carter, Reagan and Mondale campaigns indicates that the inclusion of children spots in the 1984 election cycle was much more significant that in the 1980 cycle. According to the Annenberg Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign

162 Diamond and Bates, pg. 24
Discourse,\textsuperscript{163} a search indicated that President Carter’s 1980 campaign commercials mentioned children in nine different spots. Reagan’s 1980 campaign made \textit{no specific mention of children at all}. By 1984, this trend changed dramatically. Both Reagan’s and Mondale’s 1984 campaigns spoke frequently of children, with Reagan’s campaign creating nine advertisements mentioning children, while Mondale’s team produced ten different spots explicitly mentioning children.

Quantitative analysis aside, this increase in emphasis on the concerns of American youth confirms a shift toward investment futurity, particularly as symbols of strength and success. Recalling the actual title of the spot, the story of the Reagan administration is one that was “Prouder, Stronger, Better.” This strength is evidenced by the increased visibility of children, the inevitable byproducts of those new heterosexual marriages lauded as a byproduct of the Reagan administration and its policies. When asked, “Why would we want to go back to where we were four short years ago?” it should be noted that four years ago, Ronald Reagan expressed no mention of the well-being of American children, their needs apparently secondary to other pressing concerns.

The absence of children in peril in the campaign is significant. If welfare recipients and the children of teen mothers are in such dire circumstances, is it not the responsibility of the government to aid them and better their situation? Instead, “Morning in America” depicts a nation that is free of worry or care, with only children that are products of a marital union represented in glowing terms. Others have been erased,

\textsuperscript{163} The Annenberg Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse is a digital record of transcripts of speeches, television ads and debates of twelve United States general election Presidential campaigns-1952 through 1996. Includes the work of the two major party nominees-with the exception of Barry Goldwater. Collection begins September 1 of each election year and ends on election eve or day. Nomination acceptance speeches are also included. Search was performed using the term “child*,” which would indicate all uses of words with that at the root (child, children, childhood, etc.).
subsumed by a narrative that affirms appropriate masculinity as well as femininity. The almost surgical excision of the poor from the Reagan campaign’s American narrative works to situate these families and individuals outside of the mainstream, a challenge to propriety and a burden to their neighbors. As sitting president, Reagan’s campaign made a clear narrative turn away from being in a position to solve problems, and instead stipulated that those problems have already been solved, at least for those people that really mattered: white, married, potential voters.

The Restoration of Futurity in the Symbolic Child: Impacts and Outcomes

I argue that the Iran Hostage Crisis and its resulting attack on white American masculinity, with a simultaneous reinforcement of political maternalism, served as the cornerstone in shaping not only the presidential election of 1980, but also the election of 1984 as well. Further, the rhetorical work of retrieving wounded American masculinity throughout the decade can be found implicit within many of the Reagan administration’s domestic positions. Reagan’s vocal support of the anti-abortion movement, particularly when it was seen to provide no political or electoral gain, speaks to an ongoing investment in buttressing conceptions of national futurity through a concerted investment in reproduction. Reagan’s rhetoric allows no space for difference or deviation from this framework, and simultaneously erases the poor, particularly those of children of color. As Berlant argues “The generational form of the family has provided a logic of the national future. When the modal form of the citizen is called into question, when it is no longer a straight, white, reproductively inclined heterosexual but rather might be anything, any
jumble of things, the logic of the national future comes into crisis." Extending this argument, I would suggest that this “jumble of things” also evokes fears of impotence and its resulting sterility that proved so troubling for Jimmy Carter and his critics in 1980. Only the demonstrable presence of children that meet the standards (white and born in wedlock) in abundance, can ensure this national futurity, and the campaign commercials of 1984 fit neatly into this equation.

What was the result of Reagan’s investment in a particular kind of idealized American child? His administration laid the groundwork for welfare reform that would come to fruition in 1996 during the Clinton administration. Two key pieces of legislation were the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 (which significantly reduced the financial amounts provided under Medicaid and food stamps, as well as contained language that provided barriers to teens seeking contraception services) and the Family Support Act of 1988, which cut funding for programs and also began the tactic of garnishing wages of absent fathers and requiring job training for AFDC recipients. Though the debate was couched under the guise of budgetary concerns, an assessment of those that would benefit from these programs was always couched in terms of race and gender. An excerpt from the 1986 State of the Union address that announced a task force that would eventually produce the FSA of 1988 is particularly compelling:

As we work to make the American dream real for all, we must also look to the condition of America’s families. Struggling parents today worry how they will provide their children the advantages that their parents gave them. In the welfare culture, the breakdown of the family, the most basic support system, has reached crisis proportions—in female and child poverty, child abandonment, horrible crimes, and deteriorating schools.

164 Berlant, pg. 18.
166 Luker, Dubious Conceptions, 78
After hundreds of billions of dollars in poverty programs, the plight of the poor grows more painful. But the waste in dollars and cents pales before the most tragic loss: the sinful waste of human spirit and potential. Tonight I am charging the White House Domestic Council to present me by December 1, 1986, an evaluation of programs and a strategy for immediate action to meet the financial, educational, social, and safety concerns of poor families. I’m talking about real and lasting emancipation, because the success of welfare should be judged by how many of its recipients become independent of welfare.\(^{167}\)

While Reagan directly addresses the fact that it is women and children who are burdens on the government, responsible for “waste in dollars and cents,” the race of those recipients is slightly more veiled in his word choice, referring to welfare reform as “a real and lasting emancipation.” Being freed from the “culture of welfare” is positioned as “real,” juxtaposed to the well-known Emancipation Proclamation that abolished slavery during the Civil War. Much like the race-coded term “welfare queen,” Reagan wants his audience to understand he is talking about African-American women and children, those that lay outside of the idealized framework.

The Reagan campaign’s use of children forms a link between the candidate’s investment in the narrative of rebirth and redemption. Scholars have long noted Ronald Reagan’s apparent ideological investment in the symbolism.\(^{168}\) The Reagan presidency was invested with the notion of redemptive futurity as the cornerstone of the administration’s ideology, “always in a state of becoming, as the land of tomorrow.”\(^{169}\) Reagan’s deployment of a narrative of redemption was always central to his rhetoric, as evidenced with the frequent use of the “City on Hill” metaphor. John Ehrman notes,


“When Reagan quoted John Winthrop to describe America as a ‘City on a Hill’, he was carefully appealing to American’s traditional views of themselves as a people with a redemptive mission.” Yet I would extend these arguments about redemption and regeneration to include that of procreativity, with children serving as the corporeal embodiment of regeneration and the redemption of impugned American masculinity. In 1984, that American mission of redemption was articulated as completed through the Morning in America campaign. This regeneration serves the thematic redemption of white American masculinity that suffered during the Iran Hostage Crisis. The visual images of white, marital couples and their symbolic offspring, combined with the waving flags and hard working blue collar men, exactly demonstrate this regeneration of nationalism that Shulman claims, and reconstruct the racialized future of America as one specifically white, and at least middle class. The “rugged individualism” of American futurity as noted by Hancock is not part of the dominant narrative of the welfare queen or the teen mother, perceived as always and already dependent upon the largess of the state. It is also in direct conflict with the principle of familial autonomy discussed by Managhan and McAlister. As represented in a series of ethnographic interviews with a series of Northeastern women welfare recipients, so entrenched is this representation of the prototypical welfare queen that the perception of its reality is embedded in the minds of these women themselves. "Women on welfare understand this reality; they see the shortage of jobs, the impossibility survival on a low-wage job while attempting to pay for rent and childcare. And yet even they often echo the sentiments about the lazy,
As Patricia Hill Collins declared in her consideration of the term “family values” that came to the forefront during the elections of the late 1980s and 90s, the term was not a blank canvas but instead built upon a history of publicly understood constructions. “Returning to ‘family values’ not only invoked racial and gendered meanings, it set the stage for reviving a logic of eugenics that could be applied to adolescent pregnancy, women's poverty, street crime, and other social issues.” In the American imaginary as considered by the Reagan campaign, these women and children function outside of this paradigm of masculine strength redeemed.

Finally, while Reagan’s campaign exploited the nation’s perceptions about masculinity and gender, it should be mentioned that Jimmy Carter was invested in these tropes as well, if not as much so his opponent. Carter purposely entrenched himself in the narrative of president as father/rescuer, from inviting the families of the captives to the White House to commenting about his daily prayers for their return during stump speeches. As a result, he issue of the hostages became one of failed leadership and patriarchal responsibility, a handy weapon for the Reagan campaign, used to undermine Carter in 1980 and threaten Americans with a backslide into weakness and vulnerability in 1984.

The public’s understanding of Reagan was constructed and manipulated by conservative thought leaders, both in the 1980s and today, and that very little attention was given to any actual policies. Bunch asserts that Reagan’s image managers during the 1984 campaign understood this as well. “Reagan’s own pollster, Richard Wirthlin, had told the New York Times in 1984 that the president’s bond with the voters was a kind of

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‘social contract’—that is, “the giving of a stewardship to a President based upon trust, confidence and congruence with a system of beliefs, rather than a congruence with a set of articulate policies.”

The articulate policies of the Reagan administration that were not perceived as important to voters had a huge impact on the lives of Americans excluded from the dominant narrative of the “Morning in America” campaign. Operating under this assumption of the social contract, Reagan met his obligation through fair means and foul, and the physical byproduct of this success is the presence of children. Not just children, but happy, white children that are the result of marriage with the father at the head.

This idealized family is in contrast to the family in peril, either from foreign entities or as a result of economic crisis, was a common thread present in the media as well as campaign communications throughout the 1970s. This threat of peril also was entwined with public discussion about the feminist movement, abortion, and gay rights. The ideology that invests the family with this primacy effectively works to erase those who do not participate in a reproductive framework. In the quest toward this normative stability and homogeneity, those outside of a reproductive national framework have suffered at this normative construction of the body politic. While poor women of color and their children are marginalized, so are those in the gay and lesbian community. Lee Edelman clearly articulates the multiple ways that the perpetual investment in the child is politically oppressive to those outside of a reproductive, monogamous framework, dubbing this investment “reproductive futurism: terms that impose an ideological limit of political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the

173 Bunch, Pg 110.
possibility of queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations.”

In brief, the focus on the family is exclusive and insists upon adherence to a forward-looking politics. Instead of focusing on what the issues are now, who may need help now, an investment in children and reproductive networks that produce these children erases the conditions of others. In the 1980s, it could be argued that this investment in the symbolic child contributed to the lack of intervention in the AIDS epidemic, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Americans. This criticism has been levied at the Reagan administration by activists as well as scholars. (see Shilts, Brier, others).

The investment in a demonstrable masculinity for presidential candidates had staying power throughout the 1980s and beyond. Stephen J. Ducat’s notes that the demasculinization of Jimmy Carter had long lasting implications for future Democratic contenders. “Not only did he pay a devastating political price for his failure to reduce Iran to a smoldering pile of radioactive embers, but subsequent Democratic presidential candidates have been ‘Carterized’ by GOP image makers. Mondale, Dukakis and Clinton have all been subtly and not so subtly linked to Carter and accused of the same reluctance to flex military muscle.” Not only did the candidates themselves face the confines of performative masculinity, but the taint of not meeting that benchmark of masculinity also impacted individual social issues. “Since the U.S. national election of 1980, right-wing political propagandists have relentlessly, and with great success, linked liberalism to weakness, dependency and helplessness—qualities seen by most male-dominant societies as feminine. As a corollary to the “L-word”—a label that has become so politically

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profane it requires abbreviation—we have seen the emergence of the feminizing maternal menace of the welfare state, conjured by Ronald Reagan as “Big Government.”

A large part of this movement toward retrieved masculinity was linked to notions of fatherhood, linked perhaps to trends within popular culture. “In the 1980’s, fatherhood staged a comeback, not only on the Bill Cosby Show but as a key ingredient in candidate messages, whether in the 1984 advertising of Ronald Reagan…or in the 1988 advertisements of George Bush and Michael Dukakis, who had learned the lessons of 1984. Framing a message so as to relate to the voter’s personal lives, whether it involves a teary-eyed reference to one’s father in a presidential nomination acceptance speech or an appearance at a daycare center, is essential to the language of politics in the 1980s.”

This affirmation of fatherhood dovetailed neatly with the ideology of the conservative women as well, giving merit to the notion that there are individuated and naturalized roles for men and women within the home and beyond it. The emphasis on presidential masculinity and fatherhood significantly shaped subsequent campaigns, as highly evident in the Bush/Dukakis contest on 1988. Americans were told they had to choose between a “wimp” in the form of George Bush or a weak-kneed liberal in Michael Dukakis. Widely considered one of the dirtiest campaigns in modern history, the election has been dissected broadly across academic disciplines (Cramer, Diamond and Bates, others). Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis was perpetually accused of being weak on crime by the Bush campaign. After months of television commercials linking Dukakis to convicted murder Willie Horton, Dukakis was ambushed in a debate when questioned about his position on the death penalty. The debate begins with moderator Bernard Shaw

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176 Ibid. pg. 6.
of CNN asking Dukakis, "Governor, if Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?" When Dukakis reiterated his resistance to the death penalty, he was cast as a disimpassioned man that would not vigorously defend his wife’s virtue. Dukakis’ approval rating immediately plummeted following the debate, as Bush became the more masculine candidate, in spite of the fact that he himself had been called a “wimp” on the cover of Newsweek Magazine in 1987. Evoking reference to that cover story on George H.W. Bush brings us to a contemporary consideration of representations of masculinity in the race for the American presidency. Heading into the last legs of the 2012 campaign, Newsweek trotted out the “wimp” issue again, asking the ever-present question of Republican nominee Mitt Romney. Though the issues of reproductive futurity and reclaimed American masculinity may have been answered by the Reagan campaigns, traces of their influence linger on.

Lastly, to return to the role of the wives of the captives of Iran Hostage Crisis and their maternalist politics, while they may have played neatly into the tendency of women to become political actors through their role within the nuclear family, I would argue that the legacy of their involvement in the national discourse can still be seen. The nation has continued to see the evocation of the role of wife and mother as ground for political activism in the new millennium. For example, the rise of the mobilization of the widows of those killed in the attacks on New York City in September 2001 and the emergence of anti-war activist and self-proclaimed “Peace Mom” Cindy Sheehan serve as touchstones to the likes of Dorthea Morefield and even Nancy Reagan, speaking for their men when their voices are silenced. Unfortunately, the elevation of their status as white, middle class mothers can often serve to undermine the political power of other mothers not
vested with their social privilege. A contemporary example can be found in the political activist work of Kristen Breitwesier and “The Jersey Girls,” women whose husbands were killed in the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001. They appeared before Congress to demand a more extensive investigation into the event, and are credited with the establishment of the 9/11 Commission. Though a trained attorney, Breitwesier burrowed into her role as widow and mother as credentials to demand an independent investigatory commission. As she notes in her book, *Wake-Up Call: The Political Education of a 9/11 Widow*, she felt required to detail her experience retrieving her husband’s wedding ring (the ultimate symbol of the heterosexual union) to give her words merit. The final chapter of the book, an open letter to conservative pundit Ann Coulter (who had criticized the work of the widows), is an example of the primacy of the maternalist position in action. She writes, “Ann, the Jersey Girls are moms. We have children. Perhaps one day if you have a child, you may understand the sense of duty and obligation that parents feel toward their children…There were many times we wanted to give up. But we didn’t. The reason? Our children.”\(^{178}\) Coulter is dismissed for failing to live up to her feminine potential as a mother, and her political stance is thus counteracted and dismissed. Though Coulter and Breitwesier occupy the same cultural space as white, heterosexual, upper-class professionals, Breitwesier is the mother, and therefore her words have more weight. She, and those like her, have the cultural capitol required to make claims on the state based on their position within the heteronormative patriarchal structure that citizens have been promised will lead to the nation that is “unashamed, unafraid and unsurpassed.”

Chapter 5: Moynihan, Michelle, and *Dreams From My Father*: Fighting “Otherness” Through Adherence to Traditional Gender Roles

The presidential election cycle of 2008 has been presented in the media, in the academy and in the popular imagination as a watershed moment, a tide that turned toward a new kind of politics. It has been noted as groundbreaking because of the inclusion of the presence of a woman and an African American as viable contenders for a major party ticket. The Republican nominee branded himself a “maverick,” a change from the old ways of doing business. All those involved were positioned as something other than the status quo. This dialogue with the public was created and reconstituted in almost every media outlet possible, from debate podiums to talk show hosts’ couches. Each candidate sought to establish an identity as other, somehow a break from the historical construction of the presidency and the person who currently held the position. Though this is a common tactic, and not surprising particularly in light of George W. Bush’s long tenure and poor approval ratings, the narrative of change dominated both campaigns and popular discourse.

What is absent from brief generalizations of difference is a thorough discussion or consideration of gender. A closer analysis reveals that the two candidates that emerged as the heads of their parties, Barack Obama and John McCain, serve as models of traditionally gendered male leadership. Again and again, women have gender and men do not. As Hillary Clinton rotated out of contention for the top spot and Sarah Palin took her place as the vice-presidential candidate, any talk of gender or sexuality was specifically limited to what this election meant for feminism, for expressions of sexism, for working mothers, women in politics, for teen pregnancy. Joshua Goldstein’s comprehensive book
*War and Gender* illustrates this statistically, and claims that his survey of scholarship on war and peace found that only one-tenth of 1 percent of space (within academic articles) was devoted to gender. Within that minute bit of research, he writes, “All the gender references concern women; men still do not have gender.”¹⁷⁹ This absence of the study of masculinity in the field of war studies could easily be extended to a discussion of campaigns for the presidency, in effect the election of the Commander in Chief. Men are not perceived to have gender at all, and yet the notion of appropriate masculinity is at the core of perceptions of eligibility for the presidency. Lori Cox Han writes that there is a compulsory masculinity entwined in the office itself. “The masculinity bias of the presidency in such a normalized part of American politics and culture that it is virtually invisible.”¹⁸⁰ Georgia Duerst-Lahti affirms this level of invisibility, yet articulates what she calls an empirical truth about presidential elections:

> From war hero and ultimate founding father George Washington onward, presidential elections have been very much about picking the right or best man for the job. Yet Americans appear to pick “the man” without really thinking about men as having gender. They may be aware of the choice among types of men but seem to cast this choice in individual terms rather than explicitly distinguishing among types of masculinity.¹⁸¹

As a result, though the election of 2008 resulted in a contest between an African-American and a self-styled maverick, little difference could be found in the realm of gender representation between these candidates and those who vied for the office in decades past. McCain and Obama used different prongs of prototypical masculinity to craft their personal stories, yet the role of gender did a different kind of productive work for Barack Obama. Specifically, Obama’s performance of gender as a part of a nuclear

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¹⁸¹ Ibid. “Masculinity on the campaign trail.” Georgia Duerst-Lahti. Pg. 87
family, either as a son, father or husband, produces an intelligibility to his story as well as his candidacy, while McCain’s experience as a decorated Vietnam War veteran and former prisoner of war was primary in his personal narrative. He evoked this story at any given opportunity. It is not difficult to see that the McCain campaign relied on this trope of demonstrable warrior masculinity to build its case for the presidency. However, the Obama campaign leveraged notions of appropriate masculinity just as strongly through a narrative that constructed their candidate as a benevolent son, father and husband. It is more revelatory to examine Obama’s investment in adherence to traditional gender roles not only because as president he is able to enact policy, but specifically because his administration purports to advocate gender equity while reinforcing notions of the primacy of the heteronormative nuclear family.

The impact of this reality can be seen in the actions of the Obama administration as it enacts policy under the guise of benevolent paternalism. As can be seen through an analysis multiple campaign communications, followed by his administration’s policy choices, Obama leverages the popular acceptance of traditional gender roles in an effort to counter perceptions of him as outside of the American norm. Through his books *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* and *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, speeches and campaign commercials, as well as performances at the Democratic National Convention and campaign, Obama establishes himself foremost as a son and husband and father, striving towards and representative of an idealized nuclear family steeped in male dominance and female domesticity. Marked as a different kind of candidate as a result of his race and upbringing in the exotic locales of Hawaii and Indonesia, it was imperative that Obama be
considered intelligible as functional within the historic masculine construction of the presidency, the seat of office occupied by white “Founding Fathers.” This chapter will outline the various ways that Barack Obama’s campaign and presidency have periodically turned to tropes of traditional gender roles to demonstrate their investment in a conventional understanding of masculinity and femininity, while simultaneously positioning themselves as proponents of gender equity.

Obama’s competitors have long understood that his “otherness” could be manipulated to their own advantage. In a summation of their primary opponent, Mark Penn, chief campaign strategist for the Hillary Clinton campaign, noted in a March 19, 2007 memo, that Obama’s upbringing was nothing but a liability to his candidacy: "It also exposes a very strong weakness for him—his roots to basic American values and culture are at best limited. I cannot imagine America electing a president during a time of war who is not at his center fundamentally American in his thinking and his values."182 Obama, as well as his advisors would have understood just as surely as Clinton's advisor Mark Penn that Obama's challenges were not only that he was Black, but that he could be considered foreign, other. In accusations that are still levied today, Barack Obama is confronted with challenges to his eligibility to hold the Office of the Presidency. These conceptions of Obama were present in the 2008 election cycle. Tesler and Sears conducted surveys throughout 2008 that yielded results confirming Penn’s generalization. Their work focused on perceptions of Obama’s identification as a Muslim, and write of their findings, “We conclude from these results that Obama is not just evaluated as an African American, but as someone who exemplifies the more primitively frightening

outgroup status of “otherness.” Republicans often referred to Obama by his full name, Barack Hussein Obama, in an effort to reinforce this otherness and association with an Islamic identity. By many indications, these efforts to position the Democrat as foreign were successful. For instance, respondents to a *Time* magazine September 2008 opinion poll cited Obama’s Islamic faith as a reason for their negative assessments. Regardless of whether this perception was reality or not, not to mention the inherent xenophobia demonstrated here, the Obama campaign has to counter these accusations and misrepresentations.

Thusly his story must conform as closely as possible to an accessible narrative of Americanness, and performance of appropriate gender behavior offered an opportunity to construct an aspect of his personality that could be unmarked. Brenton Malin identifies the role of gender in political campaigns, particularly in a contemporary setting that presupposes equity among men and women. "Gender" is associated with femininity, whereas masculinity is granted and abstracted, universal quality…this unmarked character is empowering for masculinity (in particular, white, middle-class, heterosexual masculinity) and disempowering for the others—the marked—alongside whom this unmarked identity is exercised. Obama could not become unmarked in relation to race, but a demonstration of heterosexual masculinity could allow an avenue to illustrate his acceptability for the office he sought and now holds. Even his opponent John McCain used gender status and a heteronormative identity to publicly defend Obama’s right to participate in the presidential contest. When told at a

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Minnesota rally by a supporter that she could not trust Obama because he was an “Arab” (clearly conflating this with his supposed status as a Muslim), McCain replied, “No Ma’am. He’s a decent family man citizen that I just happen to have some disagreements with on fundamental issues, and that’s what this campaign is all about.” McCain declares Obama’s status as a family man as credential to dismiss his otherness, and this anchor within the heteronormative nuclear family simultaneously secures his citizenship as well.  

**His Story in His Words: Connecting to the African American Experience through Dreams from My Father**

This chapter argues that, in light of the above challenges to his candidacy, in an effort to make Barack Obama more intelligible to the American public, adherence to traditional, heteronormative gender roles became pivotal in his campaign communications as well as his administration’s policies. Through an analysis of his autobiography, *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, it is apparent that Barack Obama’s public persona can be seen to endorse a worldview where men, and fathers in particular, are imbued with a natural leadership role of both the nuclear family as well as the state. While the campaign communicated to Americans that they would be getting a leader that broke barriers in terms of race, and perhaps class, there was to be no confusion that notions of gendered presidency would not be disturbed.

When considering the candidacies of McCain and Obama in opposition to one another, an analysis of their autobiographies can provide a useful frame for discussion. As voiced in their own words, the similarities between these men may be merely

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coincidental, but are certainly worth noting. Each man is named identically after his father: Barack Hussein Obama, Jr. and John Sidney McCain III. Each man attended his father’s alma mater in pursuit of the family business; the United States Naval Academy and military service for the McCains and Harvard University and public/governmental affairs for the Obamas. Jeffery C. Alexander makes an astute comparison between the two autobiographies of the 2008 candidates:

With his eyes on the ultimate honor, McCain prepared for his 1999 run for the Republican nomination by recounting his life in his autobiography *Faith of My Fathers*. The book made it clear: from birth, McCain had been destined for great things…If John McCain was a military hero, through and through, Barack Obama was the thinking man’s hero whose own life story traced the proverbial American Dream. He spoke to the need to harness opportunity and to the hard work of chasing dreams; perhaps, then, it’s no surprise that, rather than McCain’s *Faith*, Obama’s memoir would be titled *Dreams from My Father*.\(^{187}\)

These books are important because the autobiography serves to solidify the candidate’s identity and narrative *in his own words*. He is not given the ready excuse that his words were taken out of context, were manipulated by the media, or that he misspoke. Carolyn Barros writes, “Autobiographies are unique, idiosyncratic constructions of self and change; …These narratives also manifest the values, beliefs and attitudes of the culture in which they are inscribed and to which they are addressed. Thus, autobiographies both conform to and speak against their cultures.”\(^{188}\) It is this conformity that serves as fertile ground to explore the representation of Obama as an ideal would-be patriarchal leader. Before a candidacy can be intelligible to the public, these men need to demonstrate themselves to understand the role of a benevolent father in their own lives so that they might provide that kind of benevolent leadership to the citizens of the nation.

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New York Times book critic Michiko Kakutani reflected on the autobiographies of the candidates in the 2008 presidential election, particularly Clinton, McCain, and Obama, “Most books by politicians are, at bottom, acts of salesmanship: efforts to persuade, beguile or impress the reader, efforts to rationalize past misdeeds and inoculate the author against future accusations.” There is continuously an agenda behind such a book, even if it is not explicitly stated. “Autobiographical writing is always a gesture towards publicity, displaying before an impersonal public an individual’s interpretation of experience.”

These types of books are part of a growing genre of books written by presidential candidates. The last fifty years have seen a glut of presidential candidate’s autobiographies. It has become almost de rigueur to publish an autobiography, usually co-written with a campaign staffer or professional ghostwriter, in the year immediately preceding a run for the Oval Office. Jimmy Carter introduced himself to the nation in 1975 with Why Not the Best: Why One Man is Optimistic about America’s Third Century, detailing his experience in the Naval Academy and his return to his family’s family peanut farm in Georgia. In 1999, George W. Bush and his communications director Katherine Hughes published A Charge to Keep, with the transformative narrative of a young man’s challenges with alcohol and his move toward a political identity (notably separate from his father’s). Perhaps most financially successful was Hillary Clinton’s Living History (2003), published during her time as senator of New York and prior to her

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191 Other statement books, like John F. Kennedy’s Profiles in Courage (1955), Al Gore’s 1992 book, Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit and Newt Gingrich’s Real Change: The Fight for America’s Future (2009) serve more as manifestos: while these texts allow the reader to learn more about policy positions, they are not situated as a representation of the candidate’s personal experience.
eventual run for president. The book detailed her youth, her time at Wellesley College, her relationship with Bill Clinton and its resulting role of First Lady. By 2008, it was reported that she earned over $100 million in proceeds from the bestseller.

McCain’s *Faith of My Fathers* describes his own boyhood imaginings of “some future day of glory when I would add my own paragraph to the family’s legend,” and “such distinguished ancestry gave me the sense that not only that I had a claim on my country’s history, but that it would fall to me to represent the family when the history of my generation was recorded.” 192 There is a clear connection in this passage between the family’s accomplishments and the author’s natural and unearned right to leadership within the public sphere. Says Sidonie Smith “Joining the autobiographical discourses of family genealogy, profession and generation (Vietnam War veteran), McCain stakes his claim to and performs the identity of courageous maverick son of a military family, reciting his service to the nation.”193 While McCain effectively claims his country’s history, is also claiming its future, made manifest in a rightful leadership position.

The undisputed popularity of *Faith of My Fathers* and its pivotal role in the campaign should not be overlooked, as McCain (and co-author and communications director Mark Salter) wanted readers to understand that this man has learned at the knee of great patriarchal leaders and that he inherited the same leadership qualities. In her essay on the books of the 2008 candidates, Michiko Kakutani writes that the texts do more than the persuasive work of other campaign communications. “These candidates’ books remind us that the ability to construct a powerful narrative is an essential skill for a politician, for it confers the ability to articulate a coherent vision of the world, to make

sense of history and to define the author — before he or she is defined by opponents and the news media."194 McCain’s book easily fits into traditional expectations of masculinity, casting the protagonist as a wounded but noble warrior, and making the narrative of his life story easily accessible to the electorate.

This level of accessibility was not so easily achieved for his opponent. Beyond being the first viable Black candidate in the running for a spot on the ticket of a major party, Barack Hussein Obama was perceived as outside of the typical American experience. Born in Hawaii and raised there and in Indonesia, his experience did not mirror that of a typical candidate for the American presidency. Accusations of his foreignness were levied at his name (which he himself declared was “funny sounding”), his religion (polls indicate that a large percentage of Americans believe him to be Muslim), and his very citizenship, as a vocal movement deemed “birthers” declared his ineligibility for the office of president because of his purported birth in Kenya, in spite of official documents provided that he was born in Hawaii, three years after statehood, in 1964.

Though the two men’s backstories are significantly different, the consistent thread of absent fathers was pivotal in each candidate’s book. However, it was multi-layered for Obama the child, as well as Obama the candidate. It is impossible to understand Obama's attitude about fatherhood and paternal responsibility without a discussion of his family of origin and the cultural milieu into which he was born. One pivotal document, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” a nine-page memo commonly referred to as The Moynihan Report, provides a lens through which to consider Obama’s personal narrative,

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as well as how his story could be made intelligible to the American electorate. The Moynihan Report was released in February 1965, just a year after Obama’s birth. Written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Assistant Secretary of Labor for Policy Planning and Research, and prepared for the Johnson administration, the report was an incendiary indictment of Black families, particularly those of the urban poor headed by single mothers. Intended to evidence the lack of job opportunities available for Black men, the report instead was a commentary on the "pathology" of matriarchal family leadership. Briefly, the analysis found more employment opportunities for women in the form of domestic labor, which positioned them as the primary breadwinners. Men, displaced from their perceived natural role as primary breadwinner, then abandoned their families at purportedly higher statistical rates than their white counterparts. Concurrently, their absence created a power imbalance, creating a toxic Black matriarchy that further corrupted the Black family and prevented Black men from claiming their natural power position.

Citing rising rates of illegitimacy, as well as emasculation of the race as a result of the bounds of slavery, Moynihan wrote that the breakdown of the family was "the principal cause" of urban violence and delinquency. Lyndon Johnson made the report the centerpiece of his 1965 commencement address at Howard University, a historically Black institution, and received thousands of letters of support as a result. Johnson's declaratory remarks were not the dry statistics of the Moynihan report, but instead an emotionally evocative placing of blame. He said, "Perhaps most important—its influence radiating to every part of life—is the breakdown of the Negro family structure. For this, most of all, white America must accept responsibility. It flows from centuries of
oppression and persecution of the Negro man. It flows from the long years of degradation and discrimination, which have attacked his dignity and assaulted his ability to produce for his family." 195

Initially, the Moynihan report was endorsed by leaders in the government as well as in the civil rights movement. Steve Estes, author of *I Am A Man: Race, Manhood and the Civil Rights Movement*, dedicates a chapter to the Moynihan report, and connects its origins to the high profile rhetoric of Malcolm X, assassinated just a month prior to its release: "The Moynihan report and the controversy after its release brought many of the issues surrounding Black masculinity that Malcolm X addressed in the early 1960s to the forefront of mainstream American consciousness in the second half of the decade. Never before had so many social critics and commentators in the government, the media, the movement and the academy addressed the relationships between race, poverty and gender." 196

Though Obama was just a child at the time this discourse was swirling about in the public consciousness, Estes and others argue that it informed conservative political thought throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s, as evidenced in the welfare reform discourse that summoned notions of "deadbeat dads" and "welfare queens.” As Robin D.G. Kelley notes of the Black family: “We have consistently been marked as dysfunctional...We have been the thing against which normality, whiteness and functionality have been defined.” 197

In addition to the perpetual discussion and diagnosis of the health of the Black

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family, with its inappropriate matriarchs and its absent fathers, the 1990s saw a broad dismissal and disavowal of feminism as a failure, as well as the popular embrace of masculinist rhetoric, as described in Susan Faludi’s 1991 bestselling *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. Not only was feminism vilified, it was considered to be a direct cause of the diminishment of masculinity. It seemed impossible to lift the status of women without somehow subtracting from the power and authority of the average man. As deftly detailed in *American Masculinity under Clinton: Popular Media and the Nineties "Crisis of Masculinity,"* Brenton J. Malin argues that this decade saw the conflation of verbalized identity politics and the changing nature of American masculinity. "With arguments regarding the identity politics of race, class, gender and sexuality working to critique the standards on which traditional masculinity had been built, the notion of a true, real manhood underwent particular challenges. While this critique of traditional manhood is at least as old as the counterculture of the 60s, this sense of crisis seemed to gain a particular cultural currency in the 90s."198

This perceived “crisis of masculinity” spurred the development of men's groups like The Promise Keepers, founded in 1990, a conservative Christian group dedicated to establishing the father as the head of the family, and reclaiming man's "natural" position within the home and the nation. Promise Keeper and sociologist Jay Coakly was quoted in the *New York Times* saying, "Promise Keepers gives moral legitimacy to men who wish to regain power. Men in general, and white men in particular, feel they haven't been treated fairly, and that they need to get together and make sure that won't happen in the future."199 Though the official agenda of the group did not articulate racial politics (and in

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198 Malin, pg. 8.
199 Hennessy-Fiske, Molly. “Secrets and Lies: Promise-keepers’ Rhetoric Downplays Women’s Victimization.” The
fact included the participation of men of color at approximately 5%) the group is largely considered to be reactionary, formed to express “a backlash that is antithetical to movements for equality and social justice.”\textsuperscript{200} The crisis that sparked the genesis of the Promise Keepers movement was not only the supposed rise of powerful women and the usurpation of male authority, it was also anchored in the imagined loss of white privilege.

While many white men perceived there to be a crisis of masculinity, so too was there a sense of subverted masculinity in Black communities. As Raewyn Connell argues in\textit{ Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics}, it must be remembered that there is no singular masculinity; the intersectionality of race, class and sexuality are facets upon a spectrum of one’s identity.\textsuperscript{201} Often, these facets can produce contradictions, particularly across racial and gendered identities. An example: The Million Man March in 1995, an event intended to address the ways that the Black community was undermined by larger political and societal forces, organized by the Nation of Islam and led by the organization’s head Louis Farrakhan. Over 800,000 African American men gathered in Washington DC, explicitly excluding women from this political action. Proclaiming their collective identity as Black men, the event and its organizers reinstated a conservative view of gender relations. At the event, Black men were called to atone for their supposed failures as fathers and husbands; the gathering was intended not only as a political and spiritual moment, but a call to action for Black men to restore themselves to the rightful position as the head of the nuclear family. Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd’s analysis of what she calls “Black macho” traces the politics of the

Million Man March directly back to the accusations of the Moynihan report.

“Significantly, just as a gendered reading of racial conflict formed the basis of both discourse and counterdiscourse in the 1960s, the gender politics of the Black cultural pathology paradigm would serve as the shared ideological ground for both Black and white American nationalisms of the 1980s and 1990s.”

It could be argued that the Moynihan Report laid the very foundation of the Million Man March, the cornerstone of the narrative of the “tangled pathology” that has been deployed to justify conservative policies over the course of the decades, the traces of which can be seen in the initiatives of the Obama administration.

Fatherhood politics were not just part of an activist discourse. The next few years saw a glut of books on the topic of fatherhood, including 1995's *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem*, written by David Blankenhorn, the chair of the National Fatherhood Initiative and founder/president of the conservative grow the Institute for American Values. Blankenhorn's book provided yet another voice attributing the social ills of America to the absence of appropriate paternal role models. Blankenhorn contends that “Fatherless America” is largely the result of the feminist movement. He specifically names noted feminist writers Barbara Ehrenreich and Naomi Wolf as the progenitors of the problem, with the work of feminists making fathers superfluous in the American family:

The challenge for a new story of fatherhood is to resocialize masculinity by reuniting it with fatherhood, recognizing that these two ideas for men stand best when they stand together. Fatherhood cannot destroy or oppose masculinity. But fatherhood must domesticate masculinity. In a good society, men prove their manhood by being good fathers. The alternative is the continuing decline of fatherhood and a deepening ambivalence and

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skepticism toward masculinity. 203

The book went on to become a bestseller, and served as the cornerstone of the National Fatherhood Initiative. Kirkus' Book Review neatly summarizes Blankenhorn's call to action thusly: "To reverse the trend, he calls for congressional assistance in "creating higher standards of male responsibility," an annual presidential address on the State of Fatherhood, a formal "fatherhood pledge" to be taken by every man in the country, and a union of "married fathers" to transform public housing projects into "hospitable environments." 204

Ironically, as will be discussed later in this chapter, a dozen years after Blankenhorn's manifesto was published, many of his recommendations to preserve the privileged position of the patriarch came to fruition during the Obama administration, due to the work of what has been called the most liberal presidential administration in the history of the nation.

Academics as well as mainstream critics observed the emergence of the Promise Keepers movement, the Million Man March, and the fatherhood movement and postulated on what it might mean for the country. 205

Significantly, it was into this cultural gestalt that Dreams from My Father emerged. It is not coincidental that Obama’s book was published in an upswing of the fatherlessness rhetoric that has been circulating since the release of the Moynihan Report thirty years prior. When the production and release of Dreams From My Father is considered in relation to the public discourse hashing out absent fathers as the nation’s “most urgent social problem,” it can be argued that it not
only reiterates some of the points of the Moynihan report thirty years prior, but also serves as a way to make Obama more familiar and accessible to mainstream America. His was not a foreign upbringing in Hawaii and Indonesia, instead it was that of yet another Black fatherless child. While it would be a mistake to consider the book entirely as a piece intended to persuade the American public that Obama was not “other,” unacceptable for consideration as a potential president, it should be noted that the author had voiced intentions to run for political office long before its publication. While Obama did not necessarily write the book as a campaign set piece, it could be argued that he articulated political aspirations in many of the profiles that appeared in national publications on his election as the first Black editor of the Harvard Law Review. A profile in the March 19, 1990 issue of The Los Angeles Times reports: “After graduation next year, Obama says he probably will spend two years at a corporate law firm, then look for community work. Down the road, he plans to run for public office.” As might have been anticipated after a reading of Dreams, Obama has not sought to challenge traditional gender roles of male dominance and female domesticity, either in his campaign or in his administration. Instead, he reconstructs and reiterates this paradigm to his perceived advantage in sometimes subtle ways.

Barack Obama’s book Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance was written from a different standpoint than McCain’s Faith of My Fathers. John McCain’s name was a household word at the time of the first publication, not only as a three-term senator, but because of his well-publicized capture and imprisonment during the Vietnam War. Obama made a much smaller splash on the national stage as the first

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Black editor of the Harvard Law Review in 1990. As a result of this position, the opportunity to publish a book arose. While Obama certainly did not share the high public profile of his future competitor John McCain, it could not be said that this book was written without a consideration of how it would shape perceptions of his character and personality in the public arena.

What became *Dreams From My Father* was a significantly different book than it was first imagined to be. It should be noted that it was not initially contracted to be the author's reflections on his father at all. Simon and Schuster offered a book contract in November 1990 due to Obama's newfound celebrity. His inaugural work was supposed to be a reflection on contemporary race relations, titled "Journeys in Black and White."

Instead of the issue it was supposed to cover (voting rights), it became a story not only of a person navigating the racialized terrain of American identity but of a man's search for his absent father.207 According to reports about the genesis of *Dreams*, Obama faced writer’s block for years, lost his initial six figure contract due to missed deadlines, and eventually took a month's trip to Bali to allow him to complete the final work for another, less lucrative (only $40,000) deal. All in all, it was five years from contract to publication in July 1995. Setting writing aside for the immediate future, Obama was elected to the Illinois State Senate in 1996. He was thirty-five years old. *Dreams* became a bestseller following Obama’s speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, and one profile notes that though there are complaints about accurate representations of people and anecdotes from the past, "For the most part, Obama is given a free pass. He has a greater truth to tell. And in this manner, the artistic gall of the writer and the artful calculation of

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the politician are indistinguishable—as Barack Obama, who by now thoroughly inhabits both worlds, proves better than anyone else.\textsuperscript{208}

What was this "greater truth to tell?" Why did the history or discussion of political policy about race become a memoir about an absent father? Of course, for Obama these two issues are intrinsically entwined, but it would be negligent to ignore the gendered role of fatherhood in the discussion. I would argue that it would be impossible to believe the Barack Obama was not aware of the larger discourse about fatherhood happening in the years that the book was transitioning from a history into an autobiography. In order to make his personal story more accessible to average Americans, Obama connected to his experiences with those of other Americans, both Black and white. It must be understood that this book was intended to serve as the anchor of the candidate's narrative, his background and experiences laid out for public consumption. In doing so, the evocation of his typical American experience of abandonment allows him to evoke the “unmarked status” of masculinity, establishing him as a son overcoming the absence of a father. It also serves to make his experience more in line with stereotypical beliefs about the African American experience as well, ameliorating his foreignness and more securely locating him within perceptions of the Black experience. While the book begins with Obama as an abandoned child, it ends with him as a fully realized man, married and looking forward to his future parenthood.

Obama leads off his tome with a longing for his father, first in the preface, as he talks about what lead him to pursue his father’s experiences as the topic of his first book. “I recalled my first year as a community organizer in Chicago, and my awkward steps

toward manhood. I listened to my grandmother, sitting under a mango tree as she braided my sister’s hair, describing the father I had never truly known.”

*Dreams From My Father* traces the life of the future president, from his birth in Hawaii to his years spent as a child in Indonesia, through his years as a community organizer in Chicago. Without question, it is a better work of literature than McCain’s *Faith of My Fathers*, and Obama shares no writing credit on the text. Kakutani lauded the book, proclaiming it “surely stands as the most evocative, lyrical and candid autobiography written by a future president.” Though first published in 1995, it was rereleased following the author’s speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention brought widespread attention and accolades. The book did not garner much attention at first publication, but with subsequent rereleases earned a #1 spot on the New York Times Bestseller List. Janny Scott, the woman who would eventually write the biography of Stanley Ann Dunham, wrote of Obama and his book and the resulting explosion of popularity: “He has risen in politics less on his track record than on his telling of his life story — a tale he has packaged into two hugely successful books that have helped make him a mega-best-selling, two-time Grammy-winning millionaire front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination at age 46. According to his publisher, there are more than three million copies of his books in print.”

Though the majority of the book details the author’s soul searching and questioning of his place in American culture as a biracial man, it is also an affirmation of masculine framework. Much like John McCain’s *Faith of My Fathers* dictated the narrative of his

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210 Kakutani, 2009.
2008 campaign, so too did Obama’s autobiography lay the groundwork for his election. The absent father provides the plot point that launches the future candidate on his journey toward manhood. On learning of his father’s death, the son reflects, “I realized, perhaps for the first time, how even in his absence his strong image had given me some bulwark on which to grow up, an image to live up to, or disappoint.” Obama searched not only for his lost father, but his identity within a larger patriarchal network. As a young man, Obama travels to Kenya to meet his extended African family. Anecdotal remembrances of Barack Sr. revealed him to be a neglectful father, a womanizer, an alcoholic and an unsuccessful bureaucrat. The sentimental conclusion of *Dreams From My Father* is set under a mango tree as the author’s paternal grandmother tells the story of the family origins:

> I heard all our voices begin to run together, the sound of three generations tumbling over each like the currents of a slow-moving stream…but always the voices returning to that single course, a single story…First there was Miwiru. It’s not known who came before. Miwiru sired Sigoma, Sigoma sired Owiny, Owiny sired Kisodhi, Kisodhi sired Ogleo, Ogelo sired Otondi, Otondi sired Obango, Obango sired Okoth, and Okoth sired Opinyo. The women who bore them, their names are forgotten, for that was the way of our people.

The grandmother then launches in to a story of the family that leads to Obama’s father’s generation, explaining his experience working with the colonial government, his rejection by his father (referred to as the Old Man), his travels to pursue higher education in the United States. Much is illuminated for the young Obama, and he leaves Africa with a better sense of himself and his family. The epilogue of the book ends with Barack Jr.’s marriage to Michelle Robinson, his African family united with his white American

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212 Obama, 1995. Pg. 129
213 Ibid. 334
family, proclaiming himself, “the luckiest man alive.” In this narrative, the family has been restored, with a reproductive couple reconstituted at the center, the son to fulfill the role of benevolent patriarch that his father could not.

Obama understands himself to have been deprived of that pivotal masculine leadership, and while he does not vilify his mother, he provides little praise for her parenting. This analysis of his childhood coalesces easily with the assessments of Moynihan, creating a candidate’s life story that is at once unique and also highly familiar. As an African American, though a first generation citizen who was partially raised abroad, the highly familiar narrative of the absent Black father was readily deployed. The rhetoric of Blankenhorn’s *Fatherless America* is here too, lying underneath it all. A single woman, a mother, cannot provide all that her child needs without a resulting emptiness and continuing need for male leadership. The narrative created in his books situates Obama as both a product of, and as an adult the solution to the “tangle of pathology” that has become intrinsic to largely held views of the Black family.

*Dreams From My Father* is not the only Obama work that harks back to the shadow of Moynihan. In his second book, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (2006), the author echoes the report’s controversial findings. Unlike others that condemned Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Obama declares that he was not a racist, and was wrongly accused as such, claiming that liberals, “tended to downplay or ignore evidence that entrenched behavioral patterns among the Black poor really were contributing to intergenerational poverty.”

It is important to note that this book was written (and marketed) not only as a

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214 Ibid. 442
sequel to *Dreams from My Father*, but also as segue from private citizen to politician. Obama was a United States Senator from the state of Illinois at the time of publication. His words were no longer those of an observer of the political machine, but instead those of a power player. *Audacity* would also serve as the manifesto of the soon-to-be presidential candidate, and while Obama does not specifically condemn Black matriarchy as Moynihan did, it is evident that the author adheres to traditional boilerplate ideology in support of the importance of patriarchal family leadership. On Father’s Day in June 2008, Obama was entrenched in the campaign, just days after officially securing the Democratic nomination. He spoke in Chicago at the historically Black Apostolic Church of God. On this day, he took the opportunity to reiterate the importance of the father in the nuclear family, again harkening back to his own autobiography, “I know the toll it took on me, not having a father in the house. The hole in your heart when you don't have a male figure in the home who can guide you and lead you [emphasis mine].” Obama specifically evokes the role of gender here, citing the importance of not just a leader, but a male one. And in his exhortation to his audience, uses the familiar trope of infantilizing African American men: “Too many Black fathers have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men.”  

216 As noted in the *New York Times*, there were more strategic mechanisms at work in Obama’s speech than simply a call to embrace appropriate masculinity: “The remarks…were Mr. Obama's first since he claimed the nomination that have addressed the problems confronting Blacks in a comprehensive and straightforward way…His campaign hopes they resonate among white social
conservatives in a race where these voters may be up for grabs.” Again, gender plays a role in making Obama a more acceptable, viable candidate. By articulating the same rhetoric of the Moynihan report, as well as the same extended argument of *Dreams From My Father*, the candidate has made himself more integrated into the American mainstream.

“Good Kansas Stock”: Connecting to the American Story through His Maternal Family

If Obama’s father’s background was outside the mainstream, his mother’s family story fits neatly within an idealized version of Americana. The Dunham family origins lie in the Kansas heartland, with a tale of westward movement in pursuit of financial reward. If Hawaii was considered a strange and exotic location, their Kansas background helped make Stanley and Madelyn Dunham, Obama’s mother’s parents, an intelligible part of the mosaic of Barack Obama’s backstory. However, it significant that the campaign harks back to his grandparent’s experiences while assiduously avoiding those of his mother. As will be demonstrated, the Obama campaign made the most of the Dunham’s wholesome, all-American narrative when challenges to the candidate’s racial allegiances came to the forefront.

There is a bit of irony at play when Obama recalls his paternal grandmother’s words as such: *The women who bore them, their names are forgotten, for that was the way of our people.* It would not be difficult to argue that this is the way of Obama himself. Though her name is not forgotten, the role of his mother is nearly non-existent in her son’s autobiography. Obama does make a brief concession to his mother in the preface to the 2004 edition of *Dreams from my Father*: “I think sometimes that had I

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known that she would not survive her illness, I might have written a different book—less a meditation on the absent parent, more a celebration of the one who was the single constant in my life...I know that she was the kindest, most generous spirit I have ever known, and what is best in me I owe to her.” Though he does mention it, it is important to note that it was not included in the 1995 draft of the work, only appearing in the 2004 rerelease. In spite of his brief acknowledgement of his mother’s influence on him, a cynic might argue that the adjustment to the text was the result of the author’s more public persona, and the recognition that his neglect of his mother’s story might be poorly received. So often, Obama defined his background simply as thus: “I am the son of a Black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas.”

It is not as though Stanley Ann Dunham did not lead a life that would merit a book-length discussion. Reporter Janny Scott found more than enough material to produce a biography of the woman that apparently was so influential on the future president, yet not worthy of much literary consideration. Her 2011 book, A Singular Woman: The Untold Story of Barack Obama’s Mother, became a New York Times bestseller. The book details Stanley Ann Dunham Obama Soetoro’s life and travels from Kansas to Hawaii to Indonesia, relying on personal interviews to flesh out a character neglected in Dreams From My Father. The text works to retrieve her for public consumption in a way that her son’s book never tried to do. As the Los Angeles Times book critic David L. Ulin noted in his review of the Scott book:

More to the point is her intention to debunk an actual bit of mythology: Obama’s oft-repeated line, from his 2008 "More Perfect Union" speech, that "I am the son of a Black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas." It's not that this is untrue, in a manner of speaking, just that it's not true enough. As Scott observes, ‘To describe Dunham as a white woman from Kansas is about as illuminating as describing her son as a politician
who likes golf.\textsuperscript{218}

It would seem Stanley Ann Dunham’s story was intentionally subsumed by her son’s campaign due to its transgressive nature. An out-of-wedlock teen pregnancy, followed by two failed interracial marriages, does not make for a publicly palatable mother figure. While her personal life cast her as outside of acceptable, white, middle-class female behavior, her professional life was also less than traditional. An academic who left her children behind to pursue fieldwork in a developing nation is not the ideal representation of motherhood for a burgeoning political candidate well aware of acceptable standards of womanly behavior. It is intriguing to consider how the campaign would have positioned his mother had she been alive to participate: would Obama have been as electable with her standing by his side, a woman twice-married, twice-divorced, to Muslim men of color? Instead, Stanley Ann Dunham’s life is bookended by the campaign, as a single mother using food stamps on one end, and a dying woman concerned with health insurance on the other.

Though her presence is felt in the narrative, Obama gives short shrift to his mother in the text of \textit{Dreams from My Father}, placing more focus on his maternal grandmother. Madelyn Dunham, called Toot by her grandson, is represented in the book as a kind matriarch, but also as a symbol of white American fear of Black men. A passage in the book notes that she is afraid to go to the local bus stop because some young Black men have been harassing her. Little changes in other representations of this woman, and in fact she serves as a ready trope for white bigotry. Speaking about Pastor Jeremiah Wright’s inflammatory comments in his landmark speech on race in America, Obama

said in 2008, “I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother - a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of Black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.” In this anecdote, Dunham rhetorically stands in for all Americans who might fear African American men, yet were able to accept Barack Obama as an individual with traits beyond those stereotypically attached to his race.

This would not be the only instance when Obama’s campaign was able to use the notion of the Dunham’s averageness to their advantage. Far from disowning them, Obama is willing to embrace the maternal side of his family when most conducive to his campaign. While his mother could have been dismissed by the general public as odd and overly intellectual, his grandparents were positioned to serve as a conduit between the candidate and an authentic American identity. Kate Kenski, Bruce W. Hardy and Kathleen Hall Jamieson's analysis, *The Obama Victory: How Media, Money and Message Shaped the 2008 Election*, marks the change in Obama's biographical narrative as "The Obama Rebuttal." Facing accusations of racism as a result of the release of video featuring Reverend Jeremiah Wright's vitriolic comments about American culture and society, the campaign launched a new line of television spots. After months, if not years, of anchoring the candidate's identity in his role as an outsider and a new kind of American, the campaign communications effort sharply pivoted to focus on the maternal side of the family. "Unlike the focus of *Dreams from My Father*, in which he told the story of his search for a racial identity, the narrative Obama unfolded in his ads
subordinated his ancestry to an account of love of country and family.”

This “love of country and family” could be seen in the mid-June 2008 spot, titled “Country that I Love.” The message seeks to frame the candidate as an average American. Instead of the racialized “other,” Obama makes no mention of his upbringing in Hawaii or Indonesia. Instead, he locates his experiences in a physical space that he never occupied. The candidate intones, “America's a country of strong families, and strong values. My life's been blessed by both. I was raised by a single mom and my grandparents. We didn't have much money, but they taught me values straight from the Kansas Heartland where they grew up.” Staring directly into the camera for the ten seconds required to speak the above sentence, he is asking viewers to understand that he is a product of the grandparents’ experiences as part of the “Greatest Generation,” a self-sacrificing cohort committed to conventional concepts of family and nation. If his mother had veered away from participation in the prototypical construction of the family, Obama could claim access to it (in the form of his grandparents) as a model that the candidate would reiterate and reenact if elected. He completes the spot: “If I have the honor of taking the oath of office as President, it will be with a deep and abiding faith in the country I love.” He becomes the product of a “strong family” when necessary to realign himself with the mainstream, yet anyone that read Dreams From My Father in 1995 would easily have been surprised to find the author referring to his “strong family” of origin.

Another illustrative example of this switch is the campaign spot titled "Country I Believe In." It first aired October 9, 2008, and can easily be read as an effort to link the

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candidate to conventional gender roles as well as a link to Obama’s link in a chain of patriarchs, this time traced through the military performance of his mother’s father:

**OBAMA:** One of my earliest memories is of going with my grandfather to see some of the astronauts being brought back after a splash-down, sitting on his shoulders and waving a little American flag. And my grandfather, you know, would say: we're Americans. We can do anything when we put our minds to it.

**MALE NARRATOR:** His grandfather fought in Patton's Army. His grandmother worked on a bomber assembly line. But it was his mother who would see in him a promise.

**OBAMA:** My mother, she said to herself, you know: My son, he's an American and he needs to understand what that means. She'd wake me up at 4:30 in the morning and we'd sit there and go through my lessons. And I used to complain and grumble, and she'd say: this is no picnic for me, either, buster.

**MALE NARRATOR:** His life was shaped by the values he learned as a boy.


The thirty-second spot features Black and white images of the young boy from childhood to adolescence, intercut between shots of astronauts and tanks rolling down the street.

Obama’s grandparents are shown in a sweet embrace, a familiar image of a soldier in uniform. As noted in *The Obama Victory*, in order to address accusations that he was an outsider or un-American, the campaign countered with visual and narrative representations of his mother's family. "With backdrop visuals in ads showing that he was raised in a white household by a quintessentially American family…His pictures of his father were incidental and photos of his mother and grandparents, central."\(^{220}\) Yet Ann Dunham still was not the centerpiece of the communication. It was his maternal

\(^{220}\) Ibid. 102.
grandfather that secured Obama's true citizenship, passing on masculine leadership and an Americanness not invested in his mother, already established as a transgressive model of feminine behavior. Obama’s mother instead is represented as a typical model of female domesticity: teaching her son about what it means to be an American, but not a model of those behaviors herself. Instead, astronauts and Stanley Dunham’s position as a white, male veteran were what was chosen by the campaign as representative of a true American-ness, palatable and familiar enough to transmit its privilege to his grandson almost sixty years after his military service. Obama’s goal to be understood as an average American rests on the patriarchal figure of his grandfather, securely embedded within gender norms.

The Audacity of Michelle?: Feminine Domesticity in the Obama White House

Her significance—after all, as African American/women/mother/spouse—depends on representation, on signification. How else can we think about her than in terms of mediated, that is, selected and selective, images and words? 221

If Barack Obama gained status as a true American through this maternal family, he further cemented that status through his marriage to Michelle Robinson. A discussion of the importance of Michelle Robinson Obama to her husband’s successful campaign merits a lengthy discussion in and of itself. Others have claimed that it is her personal story, and not his, that made his candidacy intelligible to the mainstream. Born and raised on the south side of Chicago, the descendent of slaves, her story is much more familiar, and entwined within an understood history of the Black experience United States. Her perceived authenticity was argued to do much to assuage his “otherness.” Yet I would argue that her prominence and eventual popularity was not only racialized but highly

gendered. Michelle’s performed traditional femininity and domesticity, both as candidate’s wife and as First Lady, do much to ensure that her husband can retain his “unmarked” masculine status. While his candidacy and election were groundbreaking in terms of race, the nation saw little change in the ways that gender norms were portrayed in the White House.

The marriage of Michelle and Barack Obama has become fodder for popular discourse. Mainstream consideration of the couple as something new and unique has been widespread. From book titles like *Barack and Michelle: Portrait of an American Marriage* (2009) and *Barack and Michelle: A Love Story*, to Newsweek’s *Barack and Michelle: The Millennials’ Dream Couple*, the marriage has been praised and celebrated in ways that were not seen in recent presidential campaigns. I would argue that American fascination with this romantic union is as much about race as about the candidate’s opportunity to produce a demonstrable masculinity. They serve as an answer for perceptions about the “pathology” of the crisis of the Black family in America. It is not a coincidence that Stanford law professor Ralph Richard Banks opens his bestselling 2011 book, *Is Marriage for White People: How the African American Marriage Decline Affects Everyone*, with a vignette about the Obamas on inauguration day:

Their residency at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue not only places them at the center of our political life, it embeds them in our cultural imagination. They’re the iconic family with whom we are all called to feel kinship: two accomplished parents, adorable children...But the captivating image of Barack and Michelle also accentuates a sobering reality. As African Americans, they are extraordinary in the most ordinary way: They are a married couple raising their children together.

As Banks notes, the Obamas have symbolic implications beyond themselves and beyond the office of the presidency. Again, candidate-turned-president fits easily into familiar
tropes of gendered behavior. His status as a Black man becomes “ordinary” when positioned in the traditional role as husband and father. While African American family dynamics are seemingly always open for public scrutiny, Obama is able to position himself in contrast to other Black American men, acceptable in his performance of proscribed gender roles.

In this section, I will discuss the role of Michelle Obama in her husband’s candidacy and particularly his administration, and demonstrate how her adherence to conventionally feminine behavior has proved particularly popular with the electorate. Though her presence as a woman of color in a White House that was built by slaves is groundbreaking and transgressive, her gender performance does little to challenge notions of a naturalized, domestic role for women. In fact, her resistance to step beyond a domestic space may have consequences, particularly, for the African American women she has come to represent in the popular imagination.

At the beginning of the tenure of the administration, though a Princeton and Harvard-educated attorney, Mrs. Obama dubbed herself the “Mom in Chief.” and voiced a commitment to overseeing the education and upbringing of her children as her first priority. Though Sasha and Malia were young (7 and 10, respectively), it is difficult to imagine that these responsibilities demand her full attention, especially considering that Michelle held a full-time position as a hospital administrator before her husband took office. Yet this moniker gave the public an easily accessible understanding of the Obamas, her role parallel to his within a heteronormative framework, her biological and natural role of mother superseding any of her other possible roles. Yet as noted by Khadijah White, these representations are not benign, as they effectively erase the
challenges of those that Michelle might most effectively represent and advocated for. “The couple’s campaign narratives re-inscribed White America’s traditional notions of the patriarchal nuclear family.” As White argues, Michelle Obama had the opportunity to raise some of these issues for public consideration, but did not. By perpetually claiming only a maternal identity, her possible representation of other Black women, particularly those in the professional fields, is negated, marginalizing her own successes outside of the framework of the nuclear family. Broadly, while Michelle might serve as a role model for students, attorneys, physical fitness enthusiasts, instead her insistent, primary identity is always located within the home.

Obama’s path as first lady has "nurturing at its core," according to the *Washington Post*. Michelle Obama’s public outreach efforts as First Lady have aligned with the administrations’ commitment to traditional gender roles. In the modern era, First Ladies have taken on issues that would be the emphasis of their public work: Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No to Drugs” Campaign, or Laura Bush’s project to promote children’s literacy, the Laura Bush Foundation for America’s Libraries. Generally, it was thought that Michelle’s platform might be something more transgressive, in specific, the work-family balance—including affordable childcare and mandated paid sick leave. Yet it was not to be so. Instead, Michelle Obama chose not only non-controversial initiatives, but those that would be considered gender appropriate. The First Lady has taken up the charge against childhood obesity, as well as voiced support for the families of American veterans.

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In February 2010, Michelle Obama launched the Let’s Move! Initiative, described on its website as “comprehensive initiative, launched by the First Lady, dedicated to solving the problem of obesity within a generation, so that children born today will grow up healthier and able to pursue their dreams.” In support of this project, Michelle filmed public service announcements with children exercising. Some show Mrs. Obama teaching them how to make healthy food choices. Visits to school cafeterias and doing pushups on talk shows like Ellen allowed her a public forum to discuss the importance of exercise and healthy eating. In 2012, Michelle Obama even appeared on NBC’s reality show, The Biggest Loser, which documents contests vying to lose weight through marathon workout sessions. She participated in one of these sessions, doing jumping jacks, squats and asking mid-workout, “Can’t a First Lady get a towel?” Brittney Cooper’s 2010 article “A’n’t I a Lady? Race Women, Michelle Obama, and the Ever-Expanding Democratic Imagination” complicates the public’s fascination with Michelle Obama’s physical form by comparing discussion of the status of the body of the First Lady as a legitimization of her position as a high-status woman to the moment in 1858 when Sojourner Truth bared her breasts to a group of white men that were mockingly questioning her gender. Though Michelle Obama is still being objectified:

Obama’s muscular arms signal very different possibilities for Black women that those signaled by Sojourner Truth’s muscular arms. Truth’s arms were muscular because of the back-breaking labor she was forced to do; Obama’s arms are muscular because she has the familiar and professional support to build exercise into her daily schedule. Sojourner Truth’s muscular arms signaled a life of unpaid labor, chattel slavery and inhumane working conditions. Obama’s muscular arms symbolize her economic capacity to prioritize herself and her health and her access to the privileges of work/life balance.

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225 http://www.letsmove.gov/about May 20, 2012
It is impossible to deny that the status of Black women has changed since 1858, but I would argue that the same standard of feminine beauty, a standard that valued white facial features, straightened hair and a slim body shape, is still in place, it is just that Michelle Obama has more access to reach that idealized position. As Cooper herself notes, Obama’s position of privilege is used to reinforce the paradigm, not to subvert it.

Reference to the arduous physical toil of former slaves provides a segue into a discussion of Michelle Obama’s White House garden. In land previously tilled and maintained by slaves, Michelle has found a fertile space to further embrace feminine domesticity. Much has been made of alterations made to the White House garden, which is the subject of her first book, *American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen Garden and Gardens Across America*. The jacket cover describes the book:

Now, in her first-ever book, *American Grown*, Mrs. Obama invites you inside the White House Kitchen Garden and shares its inspiring story, from the first planting to the latest harvest. Hear about her worries as a novice gardener — would the new plants even grow? Learn about her struggles and her joys as lettuce, corn, tomatoes, collards and kale, sweet potatoes and rhubarb flourished in the freshly tilled soil.\(^{227}\)

This evocative image of the First Lady of the United States toiling in the soil of the land anchors her clearly in the feminine space of the American imagination. Not in a boardroom, not in a position of power; instead she is on her knees working to bring forth nourishment in an effort to feed America’s children. Interestingly, according to a late-2011 press release, the initial title of the book was *American Grown: How the White*

House Kitchen Garden Inspires Families, Schools, and Communities a title that even more securely anchors the garden and the First Lady to the domestic role of family care.

In 2011, she and Jill Biden, the Vice President’s wife, launched the Joining Forces project, an initiative described on the White House website as “a national initiative that that mobilizes all sectors of society to give our service members and their families the opportunities and support they have earned.” The site features images of Michelle behind a serving line, dishing out food to soldiers in uniform and their children. There is little detail about action items for the project, instead the program simply “Inspires, educates, and sparks action” and “Creates greater connections between the American public and the military.” As Time’s Mark Benjamin wrote of the project that had little actual policy or agenda, “The first lady’s message was about as controversial as yellow-ribbon bumper sticker.”

While both the anti-obesity and veterans’ campaigns are admirable pursuits, neither could be positioned as particularly progressive in terms of destabilizing traditional gender roles. Additionally, Michelle Obama’s, and by association, the Obama administration’s vocal investment in healthy eating and weight loss should not be considered without acknowledgement of its connection to the feminine beauty ideal. The First Lady’s physique, as well as her fashion style, has been widely critiqued and discussed in mainstream and academic media. She appeared on the cover of Vogue magazine just three month’s into the administration’s term, the first First Lady to do so. “I love clothes,” she told Vogue in her 2009 profile. “First and foremost, I wear what I

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love. That’s what women have to focus on: what makes them happy and what makes
them feel comfortable and beautiful.” She’s been named to dozens of “Best Dressed”
lists in American as well as international publications.

And her husband praises her style frequently, holding it up as a model for other
women at times. In May 2012, when his campaign was focused on securing the youth and
female vote in the coming election season, Obama spoke at commencement at Barnard
College, Columbia University’s women’s college. The twenty-minute speech touched on
issues like the wage gap and work-life balance, but also included a tidbit about women’s
adherence to the beauty ideal:

Until a girl can imagine herself, can picture herself as a computer
programmer, or a combatant commander, she won’t become one. Until
there are women who tell her, ignore our pop culture obsession over
beauty and fashion — (applause) — and focus instead on studying and
inventing and competing and leading, she’ll think those are the only
things that girls are supposed to care about. Now, Michelle will say,
nothing wrong with caring about it a little bit. (Laughter.) You can be
stylish and powerful, too. (Applause.) That’s Michelle’s advice.
(Applause)

Here, the president acknowledges that women face the burden of the beauty ideal, yet
evokes the image of his wife to acknowledge that women, in fact, should care about their
physical appearance and style, even if only “a little bit.” It should not be the only thing
they care about, but it should not be ignored. As noted in Kimberly R. Moffitt’s essay,
Mrs. Obama’s media representation, as well as her own positioning as a fit and stylish
woman have a more than negligible effect on typical women.

This new interest in a prospective First Lady’s physical state highlights the
added pressures that continue for women as they embark on public

commencement-address/
platforms that have little to do with their physical appearance. Clearly an aspect of womanhood embraced by Michelle, it still poses concerns for other women who want to be recognized as political forces or “escorts” for their husbands and not consumed by their body image.\textsuperscript{233}

Moffitt and others acknowledge that Michelle Obama is charting new territory as the first African American First Lady. Succinctly put by Khadijah White, “In the face of discrimination, exacerbated by the intersectional space of race and gender which her body occupies, Michelle Obama was (and continues to be) faced with the tasks of assuaging the larger racialized fears that a Black body often represents in the American imagination, dismantling the damaging stereotypes about Black women, and assuming an identity that is well-received by the American public. “These authors note that she navigates a cultural terrain that tends to stereotype Black women along three lines, the Jezebel figure (oversexed and promiscuous), the Sapphire figure (sassy and wisecracking, volatile and quick to anger) and the Mammy figure (the corpulent, perpetual domestic in care of white domestic spaces). And while Michelle Obama usually avoids these characterizations, her positioning within a traditional gender role is fraught, and risks the further marginalization of Black women. Political Scientist Melissa Harris-Perry devoted an entire chapter of her book \textit{Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black women in America} to representations of Michelle Obama and acknowledges:

Michelle's choice to accommodate this demand for traditionalism is also dangerous for Black women, who have little space in which to speak back against patriarchy and sexism among Black men...Further, to the extent that Michelle Obama's apparent embodiment of traditional submission is connected to her position as First Lady, her "success" as a woman can be used as a rhetorical weapon against the majority of Black women who are unmarried...Michelle Obama's traditionalism could encourage the discourse that establishing appropriate patriarchal families will offer

solutions to the social ills facing communities.\textsuperscript{234}

Framing Michelle as both a professional and a mother seemed untenable, and the administration as well as Mrs. Obama herself, seem to have found an acceptable position to occupy, entrenched in the trappings of domesticity, as national mother, gardener, pseudo-nutritionist and fashion icon. At an event promoting her military family initiative, she said, “Like a military spouse, I feel I’m serving my country too. It makes me want to do my job even better…realizing what these positions offer and not wallowing in the minor inconveniences that come along with it.”\textsuperscript{235} Some might feel that submission to a traditional gendered space could be considered more than a minor inconvenience. While academics like Lauret and others may note that representations of Michelle Obama are always already constructed and mediated, the average American may not, and that, as Harris-Perry notes, may have broader consequences yet to be determined, including the idea that marriage can be the solution to the social ills plaguing the African American community.

**Paternalism and Advocacy: Obama as Gender Equity Advocate**

Not everyone would acknowledge that the Obama administration has a long-standing investment in traditional gender roles. In fact, much as the campaign needed to address Obama’s “otherness” in order to construct a candidacy that could be considered tenable, it needed to assure women voters that may have been alienated by the implosion of Hillary Clinton’s bid for the candidacy. Additionally, media coverage swirled around the PUMAs (Party Unity My Ass), a group of Democratic women that were allegedly refusing to vote for Obama (particularly after he did not choose Clinton to be his running


Campaign officials recognized the potential threat to this movement, and deployed Lilly Ledbetter as a symbol of Obama’s commitment to gender equity issues. In this section, I will discuss Ledbetter’s role in the campaign, as well as her namesake legislation. Unfortunately, the administration’s vocal embrace of Ledbetter’s plight has served more as a talking point than a juncture for actual change, either in the lives of average American’s or female White House staffers.

Much has been made of the fact that the first piece of legislation signed by the Obama administration was intended to equalize men and women in the workplace. Lilly Ledbetter sued Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. after learning near the end of her 19-year career that she was being paid approximately 40% less than her male counterparts. The Supreme Court ruled against her case in 2007 as a result of their interpretation of the statute of limitations. Essentially, the Court determined that Ledbetter had not filed in a timely manner because the discrimination occurred upon receipt of her first paycheck, not her final check. President Obama’s legislation amended the 1964 Civil Rights Act allow employees to file discrimination claims within the 180-day statute of limitation at the date of the most recent paycheck. This change was intended to allow claims to be made more easily by workers around the country.

While President Obama may have signed the bill into law on January 29, 2009, the Ledbetter Act is a culmination of years of activism and legislation. Yet As detailed extensively in Alice Kessler-Harris’s work, women’s pay equity was not achieved with the flourish of President Obama’s pen. Kessler-Harris' works have given a thorough overview of the history of women's work in the United States. Her 2001 book, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century*
America, provides a historical and gendered analysis of efforts to achieve what she terms "economic citizenship" for women workers. The book discusses a wide range of laws and policies that impacted women workers from the 1920s through the 1970s, including those that limited women's work hours and work assignments in order to ensure their physical safety and availability to spend time on their domestic duties. Most relevant to this Ledbetter legislation are the efforts of organizers to enact the legislation of the 1963 Equal Pay Act. Feminists had been fighting to equalize pay standards for men and women since the end of World War II and achieved a modicum of success with this law, yet still were stymied because the law could not intervene in instances when women were paid less for comparable work, as opposed to the exact same kind of work. As Kessler notes “Given the sex segregation of occupations that sharply defined men’s and women’s jobs…demanding equal pay only if women and men did the exact same work offered greater symbolic consolation than practical benefit.”

Some 45 years later, Ledbetter's position as a factory worker and supervisor in a tire plant provided the “same work” comparison that would allow a challenge to the law, but did nothing to disturb the comparison between “equal” and “comparable” work that would bring more than the symbolic consolation that Kessler-Harris mentions. The Ledbetter legislation does little to address the core issues at the center of the wage gap, no matter how the Obama administration has positioned it as evidence their investment in gender equity.

As for Lilly Ledbetter herself, her identity as mother and wife secured her within the familiar late-twentieth century trope of the working mother. With an identity easily understood to the electorate, it was these personal attributes that were most promoted by

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the Obama campaign and administration. Twentieth century representations of woman's work have always been subordinate to her role as mother and wife, in contrast to popular understandings about Progressive Era women workers who were thought to be working in pursuit of amusement and the joys of leisure and consumption. Images of the laboring mother are illustrated in Barbara Melosh's review of public art during the depression details the explicit and implicit ways that women were positioned in the work force during the reforms of the New Deal. Both state and federal policy of the era were restrictive; the civil service could only employ one member of a family, and that position generally went to a man. Women's employment was considered to be selfish, perceived as a job taken from a man that was a true "breadwinner.” Melosh's survey of federally funded theatre as well as fine art demonstrates that women were always positioned within a maternal frame, whether their work happened in an urban or rural setting. She points out, "Even as artists placed female(s)...in the foreground...they combined female figures to a narrow range of symbolism...Female figures were wives, mothers, and daughters. In a few examples of allegories, female figures predictably embodied fertility. Importantly, it is exactly this understanding of working women as primarily mothers and wives that has contributed to their lack of equity in salary as well as in opportunities for advancement. Kessler-Harris contends that it is precisely this paradigm of woman-as-family-member that has been a marginalizing force historically and today "Not only has women's economic freedom never been axiomatic, but, with respect to the rights meant to accompany it, the limited freedoms available to all women were further restricted by


marriage and motherhood--and by treating unmarried females in the workforce as if they were potentially married and mothers. …The public interest in social order manifested in regulating (by custom as well as law) women's work-related rights remains vested in women's real or imagined family lives." Kessler-Harris' argument can be extended to consider this spot in the Obama campaign: advertisements featuring the modern icon of fair pay legislation in this fashion do little to disturb this notion within the American imaginary.

Sections of President Obama’s speech on signing day ensure that women are rhetorically connected to the reproductive family. Effectively erasing women without children or those outside of a heterosexual union, he says “But equal pay is by no means just a women’s issue – it’s a family issue. It’s about parents who find themselves with less money for tuition or child care; couples who wind up with less to retire on; households where, when one breadwinner is paid less than she deserves.” For the Obama administration, it seems permissible to advocate for pay equity when it is deemed as beneficiary to children or to a nuclear family. Again, Obama is careful not to disturb conventional constructions of gender and heteronormativity by advocating for childless, single, or lesbian women. The president’s rhetoric plays neatly into the historical representation of women’s work.

While Ledbetter’s struggle was positioned to mirror that of your average working woman, she was not an average American plucked from obscurity for her struggles against inequality, and was not a mere bystander in the Obama campaign machine. She

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played a vital role in the 2008 election, advocating for Obama in campaign commercials as well as the Democratic National Convention. She was positioned as an ally to Obama, and by extension he was positioned as an advocate for women’s rights. Her brief speech on August 26, 2008 was aired on CSPAN (instead of the major networks) and made the direct connection to the candidate. She said:

We can’t afford more of the same votes that deny women their equal rights. Barack Obama is on our side. He is fighting to fix this terrible ruling, and as president, he has promised to appoint justices who will enforce laws that protect everyday people like me. But this isn’t a Democratic or a Republican issue. It’s a fairness issue. And fortunately, there are some Republicans—and a lot of Democrats—who are on our side.

So pivotal was Ledbetter perceived to be to the campaign that a Washington Post op-ed by Ruth Marcus proclaimed, “By the time Election Day arrives, you might be forgiven for thinking that Barack Obama’s running mate is named Lilly Ledbetter.”

Following the positive response to her remarks at the convention, the campaign secured broader exposure for their ally by making her the focus of a national spot in late-September 2008, in the final throes of the campaign. Stephanie Mencimer of Mother Jones remarked that the campaign turned an “Alabama grandmother into the Democrats' poster child for the evils of a GOP-dominated Supreme Court and a powerful critic of John McCain.” Speaking slowly in a thick Southern drawl, Ledbetter looks directly into the camera, and speaks to the audience. The thirty-second video is intercut with shots of the Goodyear factory, with black and white images of Ledbetter during her career as a manager at the tire plant:

I worked at this plant for 20 years before I learned the truth. I’d been paid 40% less than men doing the same work. John McCain opposed a law to give women equal pay for equal work. And he dismissed the wage gap saying women just need education and training. I had the same skills as the

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241 Pocketbook Issue; A Pay Case That Obama Needs to Woo Women, August 20, 2008 Wednesday, Pg. A15
men at my plant. My family needed that money. On the economy, it’s John McCain who needs an education….

The clip ends with a title card featuring an image of Barack Obama and Joe Biden, with copy that reads “Obama Biden: For the Change We Need” with a voice-over from Obama indicating his endorsement of the commercial message. Again, the pay equity and the family are entwined. A working woman is necessarily positioned as a wife and mother, erasing other possible representations of her as an individual.

On the face of the Ledbetter legislation, the Obama administration has a track record of supporting gender equality initiatives while simultaneously using this issue as a set piece in campaign communications. The Ledbetter Act has shown to have a relatively long shelf life, clearly evoking emotional responses from audiences around the country even four years after its passage. However, it could be argued that the Obama administration’s support of equal pay is mere window dressing as opposed to a true investment and commitment in gender equality. The number of discrimination cases filed during this presidential term has actually decreased compared to the final years of the second Bush administration. According to Elizabeth Dwoskin of Bloomberg Businessweek, “The administration’s record in bringing such cases has been less than stellar. According to data provided by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, from 2006 to 2008 the commission brought 18 cases against employers for alleged sex-based wage discrimination. By contrast, the Obama administration brought only six cases from 2009 to 2011.” Many reports have indicated that, in fact, there is pay inequity in the White House. Female employees in the Obama White House make considerably less than their male colleagues, records show. According to the 2011 annual report on White

House staff, female employees earned a median annual salary of $60,000, which was about 18 percent less than the median salary for male employees ($71,000). 243

Beyond pay equity, some claims go so far as to call the offices of the administration a “hostile workplace,” with exclusionary practices that remove women from pivotal processes. Ron Suskind’s book, *Confidence Men: Wall Street, Washington, and the Education of A President* cites comments from women staffers in the administration that indicated that the administration’s vocal support of gender equity was not mirrored in actual practices. Suskind quotes an anonymous female staffer, saying “The idea of the boys’ club being just Larry (Summers) and Rahm (Emmanuel) isn’t really fair. He [Obama] was just as responsible himself.”244 Anita Dunn, the director of communications, policy and research operations for the Obama for America campaign, became the interim White House Director of Communications between April and November 2009. She told Suskind in 2011, “This place would be in court for a hostile workplace…Because it actually fit all of the classic legal requirements for a genuinely hostile work place to women.”245

Suskind’s text is not the only work to illuminate the exclusion of women in the Obama White House. Jodi Kantor’s 2012 *The Obamas* details the minor efforts made by the administration to appear to be gender neutral, most of which were the result of negative publicity that could damage the president’s public persona. The White House’s reaction to an October 24, 2009 *New York Times* piece by Mark Leibovich, titled “Man’s World at White House?” was one of concern because “this presidency was supposed to

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245 Ibid. 340
be different, inclusive, more than the usual club of white males.” The article focused on all-male sports gatherings that excluded women from social contact with the president, as well as from more top-level decision-making processes. Perception was more important than reality, and according to Kantor, Obama convened a brief and awkward dinner with the female staff, asking “Are there genuine concerns that I need to know about?” Concerns about exclusionary homosocial sports culture were apparently not considered “genuine.”

In spite of efforts to appear inclusive, pundits and insiders observed that the administration was not as gender neutral as it purported to be. Maureen Dowd commented in her column after the New York Times article ran, “It is the very enormity of the change Obama represents that makes him cautious at times about more change. Because Obama regards himself as the change, he didn't immediately see the need to alter what his aide Anita Dunn calls the "optics." His race also gives him cover; it took quite a while for anyone to accuse Obama of being exclusionary.” As noted in a Politico.com article by Gary Bauer, chairman of the Campaign for Working Families, “This president seems to prefer making symbolic and overtly political gestures to women rather than doing the hard work of addressing day-to-day dynamics in his workplace.”

In 2009, Secretary of the Treasury Timothy Geithner affirmed this sentiment in a more blunt fashion: “The perception is that women have real power, yet they all feel like shit.”

As a brief but important addenda, Larry Summers, who led Obama’s National Economic Council though 2010, is the former president of Harvard University that was pushed out of his position at that institution in part because of anger over his remarks at

246 Kantor, pg. 147
248 Suskind. Pg. 339
the National Bureau of Economic Research Conference on Diversifying the Science & Engineering Workforce in January 2005. At an event intended to address the lack of diversity in the sciences, Summers famously said it was innate gender differences that caused any discrepancies. Any lack of representation of women in the sciences could be attributed, he said to “the general clash between people's legitimate family desires and employers' current desire for high power and high intensity, that in the special case of science and engineering, there are issues of intrinsic aptitude, and particularly of the variability of aptitude, and that those considerations are reinforced by what are in fact lesser factors involving socialization and continuing discrimination.” Of course, this assessment neglects to consider women or men who might not participate in “legitimate family desires,” as well as voices an investment in sexist and heteronormative ideologies. Summers received a vote of no confidence from the Harvard faculty in March 2005, and eventually resigned in February 2006 following opposition from students and staff.

Yet these sexist remarks did not deter the Obama administration from placing him in a high-status position, charged with making influential decisions with a widespread impact. Summers, the Secretary of the Treasury for the last eighteen months of the Clinton administration, was considered for the role again in late-2008 in the midst of the economic crisis. Obama had just won the election, and considered the possibility of reappointment, but feared that Summers would not pass the trial of Congressional confirmation. Instead, he appointed Federal Reserve Bank Chairman Timothy Geithner, and placed Summers as the Director of the National Economic Council, a position that does not require confirmation. This strategic placement indicates that the Obama

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administration was fully aware of Summer’s sexist remarks and ideology, were aware that public sentiment would be opposed to his appointment, and strategically found a place for him in the administration regardless. In 2012, Obama went so far as to include Summers name on a list of potential appointees for head of the World Bank, spawning an uproar from mainstream and online media. Ultimately, Obama nominated Jim Yong Kim, president of Dartmouth College.

It is difficult to reconcile Larry Summers’ role in the administration with a true commitment to gender equity, particularly in light of the campaign’s intolerance of racist remarks. When Jeremiah Wright’s vitriolic comments became public, he was quickly disowned and disavowed. Yet as a spiritual advisor, he would arguably have less influence over policy decisions than Summers would as chief economic advisor. But through strategic maneuvering, a place was found for this individual among the highest ranks of the administration. Wright was dismissed because his remarks were seen as a direct threat to the candidacy because vocal racism is popularly considered unacceptable. Yet, sexist remarks are not judged with the same universal condemnation, either by the electorate or by the President himself.

The Obama administration, though publicly positioned as advocates of gender equity, has framed their support of women within traditional perceptions of appropriately gendered behavior. Women should receive equal pay for equal work when there is a family that will reap the financial rewards. Women in the White House are present, but subordinate, paid less than their male counterparts and effectively silenced if they complain about their exclusion from the decision making process. This is a framework that reiterates and reconstructs women’s role as central to the family, supportive yet
subordinate to the goals of the team, be it a reproductive family or the Obama administration itself, concerned only with the “optics.”

**Father Knows Best: Paternalism and Policy in the Obama Administration**

*It should no longer come as a surprise that the president of the United States is, on perhaps an unconscious level, an old-school patriarch.*

Rebecca Traister, December 8, 2011

It is not an accident that the titles of Obama’s books clarify the importance of the father and the family in the development of a full personhood. Mothers may be necessary for the meeting of day to day physical care, but only a father, even an absent one, can make a man a leader. The author needed to demonstrate how he was fit for the role of metaphorical father of the nation. As previously noted, patriarchy has been historically embedded in the executive office, with the president bearing the responsibility and paternal care of his constituents. This investment in the role of elected father/patriarch works to erase the personal autonomy of the nation’s women and girls in a number of ways, be it through punitive legislation, social marginalization, or sublimation to the idealized nuclear family with a male leader at the head.

The Obama administration provides us with a concrete realization of his role as an elected patriarch. The president often invokes his role as a head of household when he is functioning as the head of the nation, and his notion of appropriate fatherhood can be seen to shape aspects of his domestic agenda. Much of his identity when dealing with women and women’s issues has been anchored in his identity as a husband and a father. In the first months of his presidency, in March 2009, at the signing of the Executive Order Creating the White House Council on Women and Girls, Obama’s opening words

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250 *Obama’s woman problem*, Salon.com, December 8, 2011
at the event were, “I sign this order not just as a President, but as a son, a grandson, a husband and a father…” This is not simply a rhetorical flourish at work here, but indicative of a larger conceptualization of the speaker’s identity. When making decisions for and about women, Obama places primacy not only on the structure of the nuclear family, but of his role as patriarch within it. Note the escalation of his roles: he begins as son and ends as father. It is this identity that gives him the credibility and authenticity to launch an initiative that will rescue women from their current circumstances.

In this instance, the overt paternalism was generally overlooked because the initiative was generally perceived as positive for women. In fact, he was extolled as a true feminist leader, receiving proclamations of support from women’s organizations throughout the country. Kim Gandy, president of the National Organization for Women (NOW) reported in a news release from her organization, “It was a pleasure to hear the president make this commitment to supporting women and girls in such strong and unequivocal terms.” This is not to say that the patriarchal language was completely overlooked. As noted by Kathleen Parker in the Washington Post, “There's little profit in criticizing a move to make life better for the fairer sex. Still, one does have to suppress a chortle as we pretend that the First Father's rescue of damsels in distress is not an act of paternalistic magnanimity. Chivalrous, even.” And as bell hooks would claim, making gains within a patriarchal system makes it no less a patriarchy.

Later in his administration, Obama evoked his role as father to justify restricting girls’ access to contraceptives. In December 2011, Obama’s Health and Human Services

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Secretary Kathleen Sebelius overruled the Food and Drug Administration’s recommendation that emergency contraception be sold on drugstore shelves and made available without a prescription to women under the age of 17. Though Obama reported that he was not intrinsically involved in Sebelius’ decision, he went on the record to support it, again claiming authenticity and credibility as a father of two girls. At a White House press conference on the issue, he said, “I will say this, as the father of two daughters: I think it is important for us to make sure that we apply some common sense to various rules when it comes to over-the-counter medicine.” The evocation of “common sense,” present within the father but not the daughter, is a clear demonstration of Obama’s commitment to paternal leadership. He is imbued with a responsibility to care for his citizens, his metaphorical children, in the same framework in which he makes decisions for his own daughters. He evokes the privilege of his role of father to make policy that impacts others’ daughters throughout the nation.

Unlike other instances of Obama’s vocal paternalism, this comment generated much commentary from the mainstream media, social networking sites and women’s activist groups. This time, NOW leadership was not supportive of the Obama administration: “His statements about Plan B yesterday are condescending. They’re disempowering and frankly they communicate sex discrimination,” said Erin Matson, National Organization for Women vice president. “In saying that he thinks he knows what’s best for women … and then [he] goes on to trivialize emergency contraceptives … What we are talking about is women who have up to 72 hours to prevent a pregnancy that

they do not want.” Rebecca Traister had a more biting critique of the decision, and the president’s comments in particular:

I think it is important for my president not to turn to paternalistic claptrap and enfeebling references to the imagined ineptitude and irresponsibility of his daughters – and young women around the country – to justify a curtailment of access to medically safe contraceptives. The notion that in aggressively conscribing women’s abilities to protect themselves against unplanned pregnancy Obama is just laying down some Olde Fashioned Dad Sense diminishes an issue of gender equality, sexual health and medical access. Recasting this debate as an episode of “Father Knows Best” reaffirms hoary attitudes about young women and sex that had their repressive heyday in the era whence that program sprang.

Many were surprised by the decision to limit access in light of the FDA’s recommendation, prompting an editorialist for the Daily Beast blog to speculate: “What’s confusing is why the White House thinks it’s a smart strategy to try and appease its foes while infuriating its friends.” Yet I would argue that there is nothing particularly surprising or revelatory in these remarks. Obama, while purporting to support women’s equality initiatives, believes that leadership and fatherhood operate naturally in tandem, by the necessary exclusion of women. His investment in the primacy of male leadership can be gleaned from his autobiography, but it is apparent in his enacted policies as well as language used to define himself and his relationship to women and girls that he functions much as any historic patriarchal leader.

To further this discussion, an investigation of fatherhood initiatives launched by this administration, as well as consideration of a mother’s appropriate role within the family, yields more evidence of Obama’s commitment to the importance of patriarchs,

256 http://www.salon.com/2011/12/08/obamas_phony_paternalism/
both within the nuclear family and the government. First, a glimpse at the previously mentioned White House Council on Women and Girls: the guiding principles of the Council are implicitly entrenched in normative gender roles. The four initiatives to achieve: ensure economic security, promote work-family balance, support reproductive choice, and prevent violence against women. On the face of it, it is encouraging to see an administration tackle these issues in a vocal way, to work to challenge some of the material conditions that affect the lives of American women and girls. But a closer examination reveals that by positioning the topical “work-life balance” as a women’s issue, it effectively situates the role of childcare and domestic labor as naturally within the scope of woman’s responsibility.

It is this expectation that reiterates perceptions about what is appropriately masculine and feminine, what constitutes the role of the father and the role of the mother. As Lisa Belkin said in her New York Times column immediately after the event launching the Council, “Too many of the problems women and girls have in the world stem from the fact that the problems are considered “their” problems — “women’s problems” — rather than problems that both genders share.”258 The importance of the framing of the work-life balance issue cannot be overstated. Professor of Political Science Jill Abraham Hummer succinctly articulated the issue in a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in 2010:

How would the ideology of patriarchy shape policies on work-family balance? While statutory language may be gender neutral, how the Administration frames the issue of work-family balance is not. The Administration portrays work-family balance as a women’s issue, thereby minimizing the man’s role in the juggles.
Effectively ghettoizing domestic responsibilities into the feminine realm clearly demonstrates that Obama is committed to preserving and protecting traditional gender roles as well as the primacy of the patriarch. Children may need the leadership provided by a male role model, but their care is the responsibility of the woman that bore them.

Does this argument stand up when faced with the Obama Administration’s National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, an initiative operating under the auspices of U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships? Found online at the website www.fatherhood.gov, Obama is featured as an idealized role model of fatherhood, encouraging visitors to “Take the Fatherhood Pledge,” evoking the Fatherhood Pledge recommended in Blankenhorn’s Fatherless America in 1995, by clicking on an image of Obama roughhousing with his daughters Malia and Sasha. Clicking the link takes the viewer to a page that will allow you to electronically sign the pledge, but never explicitly says what the pledge is. Instead, we are reminded that the role of the father is integral, and that identifies our president’s paternal role as being as important as his political one.

Harking back to the autobiography that anchored his candidacy, the copy reads:

“President Obama grew up without his dad, and has said that being a father is the most important job he has. That's why the President is joining dads from across the nation in a fatherhood pledge – a pledge that we'll do everything we can to be there for our children and for young people whose fathers are not around.”

The Fatherhood Initiative also hosts Father’s Day events in conjunction with the Department of Housing and Urban Development with “two purposes: to strengthen the bonds between fathers and their

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children, and to make education, health care, and employment resources available to the fathers leading to economic self-sufficiency.”

These strange echoes to the mission of the Moynihan Report, Blankenhorn’s *Fatherless America* and the Promise Keepers should be considered in any discussion of the Obama’s administration as a changemaker when it comes to destabilizing the primacy of the heteronormative family, a family that has historically marginalized women and positioned the father of the household as the natural leader. While not an explicit condemnation of Black matriarchy, it signifies an investment in paternal leadership that troubles a gender-neutral understanding of this initiative’s goals.

**The War on Women and the 2012 Campaign**

The Obama narrative, from a boy child yearning for an absent father to a young father and husband, and finally to President of the United States, conforms to standard gendered expectations of what an American leader should look like. The campaign strategically chose to deploy images of Obama’s family of origin, as well as his wife and daughters to counteract accusations of his otherness. While this is certainly to be expected in terms of any wide-reaching persuasive communications campaign, the narrative of Barack Obama as a family man does little to bring about the “change” so heavily marketed during his campaign. The positioning of Obama as a son and a father does little to yield greater representation for those who either cannot or would not identify as either.

*Dreams from my Father* allows the Obama life story to become more comprehensible to the American public, even though it details the atypical experiences of

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his childhood. The absent father, though foreign in his nationality, is easily related to the absent African American father so familiar a trope to the American public. Obama, as well as his presidential advisors, understood that by constantly declaring himself a fatherless child, it would provide an opportunity not only to demonstrate his own gender normative behavior as a father and a husband, but provide a space that would allow him to appeal to an entrenched conservative position on the perceived failures of Black American fatherhood. When touchstones to other aspects of the familiar American story were needed, Obama evoked his Kansas roots. Otherwise, his references to his maternal family and in fact, his mother remained a mute symbol throughout most of his campaign.

 Appropriately gendered representations of Barack Obama continue into his first term, now supported by rhetorical confirmation of the president as paternal leader. Gender considerations continue to play a large role in the Obama campaign and administration. Republican legislative efforts to curtail reproductive health access to contraception, as well as abortion services, as well as repeal state equal pay acts, has been dubbed the “War on Women” through mass media discussion of the early 2012 election coverage. As a result, the Obama campaign has again shifted to position themselves as women’s advocates. However, their communications campaign seems inextricably steeped in a paternalist framework. Take for example the interactive, “Life of Julia” online slideshow, which features a faceless graphic of a young girl named Julia that grows into an adult. Text accompanying the image details how Julia would fare better as a result of Obama policy’s than if his opponent Mitt Romney were elected. Benefits include non-gendered opportunities like low interest student loans and the availability of

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261 http://www.barackobama.com/life-of-julia
Medicare in old age, but most are anchored in how Julia’s entire lifespan as a woman will be significantly better thanks to Obama. The concluding slide reads, “From cracking down on gender discrimination in health care costs to fighting for equal pay, President Obama is standing up for women throughout their lives.” Yet the campaign rang hollow, evoking a piece in the New York Times titled, “Obama: Stop Condescending to Women.” Dismissed as paternalistic, Julia benefits from Obama policies, but this every-woman occupies a safely gendered space in the narrative. She goes to college, has a child, and pursues her career as a graphic designer. None of her actions are particularly transgressive or disruptive of the traditional gender roles the White House has tried so hard to construct. I would argue again that this campaign is intended to establish Obama as an advocate for women, but in reality it just reiterates a larger investment that women remain in their naturalized role as reproductive citizens.

Familiar campaign surrogates have emerged as well. Ledbetter reappeared on the campaign trail in 2012, again supporting now-President Obama in his bid for re-election. Her name arose as the administration worked to demonstrate that it met its campaign promises. According to a May 2012 Associated Press article, Obama’s typical stump speech anchors the Ledbetter legislation as a goal met: “one of Obama’s biggest applause lines is still his reference to the Ledbetter law — signed on his ninth day in office with the statement from the president.” This legislation still serves as a landmark of gender equity activism, in spite of the fact that fewer cases have actually been brought to trial.

As the campaign season progressed toward the November 2012 election, the Obama campaign continued to engage in the public discourse and the War on Women,

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yet continued to position women as perpetually entrenched in domestic roles as mothers and wives. Michelle Obama fell perfectly in line with these representations of women at her September 2012 speech at the Democratic National Convention. Again, she rolled out the “Mom-In-Chief” moniker, while gushing about how her love for her husband was as strong now as it was when she met him so long ago. Once again, Barack Obama, the President of the United States, was framed as a father and a husband, the best man to tend to the needs of the nation’s children:

You see, at the end of the day, my most important title is still "mom-in-chief." My daughters are still the heart of my heart and the center of my world. But today, I have none of those worries from four years ago about whether Barack and I were doing what's best for our girls. I know from experience that if I truly want to leave a better world for my daughters, and all our sons and daughters…if we want to give all our children a foundation for their dreams and opportunities worthy of their promise…if we want to give them that sense of limitless possibility – that belief that here in America, there is always something better out there if you're willing to work for it…then we must work like never before…and we must once again come together and stand together for the man we can trust to keep moving this great country forward…my husband, our President, President Barack Obama.

Obama easily won the election in 2012, with many analysts attributing the victory to the Democrat’s wider appeal with women. According to exit polls, 55 percent of women voted for Obama, while only 44 percent voted for Mitt Romney. In total, the gender gap in 2012 added up to 18 percent -- a significantly wider margin than the 12-point gender gap in the 2008 election. It should be inferred from these results that voters are pleased with the administration’s policies, particularly with regards to those issues that are perceived to disproportionately impact women.

So it should be of little surprise that Obama continues to move forward with policy decisions framed within his patriarchal authority, from his privileged position as a
father of young children. Immediately after the 2012 Newtown, Connecticut elementary school shooting, Obama addressed the nation as he wiped tears from his eyes, referencing this act of violence in relation to other recent acts of gun violence around the nation:

    Each time I learn the news I react not as a President, but as anybody else would -- as a parent. And that was especially true today. I know there’s not a parent in America who doesn’t feel the same overwhelming grief that I do. The majority of those who died today were children -- beautiful little kids between the ages of 5 and 10 years old. They had their entire lives ahead of them -- birthdays, graduations, weddings, kids of their own.  

Within just a few sentences, the President has effectively erased large swaths of his constituency: those without children. “Anybody else” might react from a variety of standpoints, not “as a parent.” Even the loss of the victims of the shooting were framed as potential parents (“kids of their own”); their removal from the future landscape of the nation a detriment because of the loss of their reproductive capacity. While Obama’s emotional reaction could easily be criticized as a sign of weakness, it was excused because it would only be appropriate for a father to cry at the loss of his children. Obama took the moment here to argue for “meaningful action” that would bring about an end to gun violence. While the results of this policy action are still in flux, it should be remembered that Obama framed his pursuit of policy change from within the parental paradigm.

    For President Obama, the value of fatherhood is sacrosanct, and its absence can be cited as the cause of multiple social ills. As a result, while women are often situated within domestic spaces, it seems they are always positioned as secondary (and lacking) leaders of those families without fathers in residence. Returning again to the politics of

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the “Fatherhood Initiative,” Obama addressed his hometown of Chicago in wake of a
year-long spate of violence that has been called a “murder epidemic.” Importantly, he
once again claims that the lack of male role models is the source of the problem:

There are entire neighborhoods where young people, they don’t see an
example of somebody succeeding. And for a lot of young boys and young
men, in particular, they don’t see an example of fathers or grandfathers,
uncles, who are in a position to support families and be held up and
respected.
So we should encourage marriage by removing the financial disincentives
for couples who love one another but may find it financially
disadvantageous if they get married. We should reform our child support
laws to get more men working and engaged with their children. And my
administration will continue to work with the faith community and the
private sector this year on a campaign to encourage strong parenting and
fatherhood. Because what makes you a man is not the ability to make a
child, it’s the courage to raise one.

By sourcing marriage as the solution to this (and other) problems, Obama is not only
furthering an investment in heteronormativity but also supporting an institution that has
largely marginalized the role of women since its inception. His promise to work with
faith-based initiatives (many of which have vocally supported beliefs that women’s roles
in both family and society should be anchored in submission) seems far removed from
the 2008 campaign slogan which promised “Change We Can Believe In.” Apparently, the
fulfillment of America’s promise requires an investment in traditional gender roles.  

264 Obama, Barack. Change We Can Believe in: Barack Obama's Plan to Renew America's Promise. New York: Three
Rivers Press, 2008. Print
Chapter 6: Women in Presidential Politics and the Maternal Role

As of this writing, no woman has made it to the top of the ticket in the presidential race. While the 2008 election cycle marks the most recent entrée of women onto the presidential campaign stage, Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin are far from the first to vie for the Oval Office. As far back as 1872, women have attempted to participate. Suffragist Victoria Woodhull ran for president on the Equal Rights Party, almost fifty years before universal women’s voting rights in the United States. In 1964, Maine Representative Margaret Chase Smith was the first woman to have her name submitted for nomination by a major party, and in 1972, Shirley Chisholm was the first African American woman to reach the same landmark for the Democrats. Other 20\textsuperscript{th} century women candidates sprang from alternative political parties, including the Socialist Workers Party, the Communist Party and the Green Party. These women were typically using the visibility provided by a presidential campaign to advocate for a more comprehensive policy agenda, with little hope of a viable candidacy.\textsuperscript{265}

Much as their male counterparts rely on an easily accessed heterosexuality and normative gender performance, female presidential candidates leverage their roles as mothers and wives to demonstrate competence and character on the campaign trail and to compensate for other perceived weaknesses. Women are hindered not only by their “natural “ lack of masculinity, a requisite for the office, but by the requirement to perform their femininity while demonstrating leadership skills that have always been constructed as being masculine. Women candidates need to visibly display their

\textsuperscript{265} Rutgers University’s Center for American Women in Politics provides a comprehensive list of women that have made moves toward the Office of the Presidency on their website www.cawp.rutgers.edu.
adherence to the dominant paradigm of gender performance, and by extension, prove their viability as a potential candidate.

In 1984, Americans witnessed a shift in gender representation with the inclusion of Representative Geraldine Ferraro as Vice-Presidential nominee on the Democratic ticket. Her running mate, Walter Mondale, had served as Jimmy Carter’s Vice-President, and his campaign operatives felt that the presence of a woman on the ticket would offer one of the few weapons to unseat the popular incumbent, Ronald Reagan. At his announcement of her selection, Mondale said, “History speaks to us today…Our founders said in the Constitution, 'We the people' - not just the rich, or men, or white, but all of us." While Mondale may have positioned Ferraro as a symbol of the Founding Fathers’ vision, one of his advisors was much more calculated in his assessment: "She's a woman, she's ethnic, she's Catholic. We have broken the barrier. She will energize, not just women, but a lot of men who have fallen away from the Democrats.”

Even those who would sensibly advocate for Ferraro’s strengths as a competent leader articulated her value to the ticket solely based on her identity, anchored in gender and ethnicity. An editorial in the *Washington Post* reflecting on the value of Ferraro to the ticket (and the nation) reiterated an essentialist gender ideology:

One argument we still hear, especially as it is reflected in public opinion polls, is that females are by nature too "emotional" and therefore unstable to govern with steadiness, cool and restraint. We have never understood this argument except as a historical male fiction. Surely if you look at the gruesome march of physical violence—the bang, pow and splat of emotion and gore down through the centuries—and ask yourself who lost control first, foremost and most often, who committed all that pillage and crime (and who mainly still does) it wouldn't be the female sex…But wild, uncontrollable emotion? Please. Look again at

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which of us have been most given to flying off the handle and settling disputes with a club.  

Women were valuable specifically because of the way that they were different than men. Within political discourse, the lens through which they are viewed is always already skewed to view a woman candidate as feminine first, with the construction of what is feminine is well-defined and popularly understood. Further, the notion that they could embody the same desirable characteristics as a male candidate, strength, decisiveness, competence, is rarely brought to the forefront. Instead, their womanly differences are paramount, whether those differences are virtues or vices.

Though the focus of this study has been on the performance of masculinity, women candidates also face an insistence upon their adherence to normative gender performance. The demonstration of appropriately performed femininity is essential. An early assessment of Ferraro offered this critique: “Geraldine Ferraro's biggest political asset is a personality made for the trade, an ability to mix talk of kids and recipes with her work on the Budget Committee and the lowdown on politics in Queens.” It is difficult to imagine a male politico’s success in his profession being linked to extensive skills with recipes and parenting. For all of the rhetoric about Ferraro’s landmark status as the first woman in her position, her campaign frequently situated her as a mother and a wife, positioning her as within the same easily accessible frame of heterosexuality that male candidates must occupy. During her acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, she ended her remarks with a reference to her family of origin, her nuclear family, and the children of the nation:

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My fellow Americans: We can debate policies and programs. But in the end what separates the two parties in this election campaign is whether we use the gift of life - for others or only ourselves. Tonight, my husband, John, and our three children are in this hall with me. To my daughters, Donna and Laura, and my son, John Jr., I say: My mother did not break faith with me . . . and I will not break faith with you. To all the children of America, I say: The generation before ours kept faith with us, and like them, we will pass on to you a stronger, more just America.  

Simultaneously, Ferraro is asking the nation for their vote while publicly promising to her children that she will continue to fulfill her natural role as their mother. Beyond that, she is promising to extend those maternal responsibilities to the children of America. The phrase “the gift of life” is bound to popular discourse in terms of motherhood, a gift that can only be bestowed by women fulfilling their predetermined biological, reproductive role. Ferraro is extending that role, and its attendant responsibilities of maternal care, to the office of the presidency. As a woman, she is different than her opponents, and brings a different set of assets to the position, assets that are assumed to be natural and essentially maternal.

The first television commercial featuring Ferraro had her speaking from a podium at a rally, with the American flag bracketing the shot. She focused on families and American futurity, clearly articulated in the first words she spoke:

FERRARO: You want more for your kids than you had, and that's the American dream.
MALE NARRATOR: Mondale and Ferraro: bringing a new fairness to America. While Mr. Reagan tries to slash Medicare, they fight for seniors. While he forces 4 million people out of work, they fight for workers, and on tax breaks...
MONDALE: I refuse to make your family pay more so that millionaires can pay less.
MALE NARRATOR: They'll be taking the first step in a new direction for America. Mondale/Ferraro. For your future.

If male presidential candidates are operating in the shadow of the Founding Fathers, with a set number of tropes that they may deploy to make the case for their election, so too are women limited in their roles. Ferraro’s landmark candidacy did little to destabilize the position of women’s political actions as anchored to their role as mother of the nation’s children. Again and again within political discourse, there is a repeated insistence upon women as both heterosexual and reproductive. Judith Butler’s articulation of “abject identities” frames women as well as men: this view of those who do not participate in procreative sexual activity (or at least a behavior that might lead to procreation) are unintelligible and undesirable to the state, as they are not in a position to create the idealized child craved by the state and the community. It may seem far reaching to use Butler’s assertions to consider the use of the maternal role as a justification for the presidency, but it is relevant to note that this regulation of women’s bodies does not merely make itself manifest in the process of reproduction, but also in the elimination and erasure from the national landscape of those women who are perceived to squander their productive possibilities. At bottom, women should leverage or eliminate their fertility for the purpose of the state, or face the consequences of remaining perpetually on the outside of its protections and privileges. Those who have fulfilled this role may reap the reward, an intelligibility to the public.

In spite of an adherence to these tropes of gender performance, the Mondale/Ferraro ticket suffered the largest loss in electoral history, with the Democrats winning only Mondale’s home state of Minnesota. Many speculated that Ferraro’s presence did little to sway the results one way or the other, and that her contribution to presidential politics
was more symbolic than tactical, a breakthrough moment that would allow more women to visualize themselves as presidential possibilities. More women did enter the fray following Ferraro. In 1988, Democratic Congresswoman Pat Schroeder made preliminary steps toward candidacy, but dropped out of the race due to lack of funds. She was soundly ridiculed for her teary withdrawal speech, displaying the already presumed feminine weakness and vulnerability. In 1999, Republican Elizabeth Dole cited the same financial reasons for her withdrawal. When Dole withdrew from the race, Wall Street Journal columnist Paul Gigot dismissed her candidacy as a “novelty,” noting, “She never developed a real rationale for running, other than, I'm the first woman candidate; let's make history. And you have to have something other than your résumé to run on.”

Yet what other than a resume should demonstrate one’s competency or ambition for office? If Dole’s experience in the Nixon and Ford administrations on the Federal Trade Commission, as Regan’s Secretary of Transportation, Bush’s Secretary of Labor, and a decade-long tenure as President of the Red Cross did not establish her experience and insight into the role of the President of the United States, what could? It is worthy of noting that Elizabeth Dole had no children, preventing her from accessing the privileged position to speak as a proponent of youth and futurity that was available to Ferraro and her predecessors on the national stage.

While the would-be candidacies of Schroeder and Dole have largely faded from popular memory, the experiences of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin in 2008 offer a glimpse at the ongoing challenges faced by women reaching for the Oval Office. Though on opposite sides of the political spectrum, both women leveraged their roles as wives and mothers to situate themselves in the national imagination. Clinton’s claim of

international experience was largely based upon instances of access to world leaders provided as a result of her role as First Lady. Instead of focusing on her paltry international experience, Palin instead relied on her experiences as a mother of five, garnering support among conservatives for her pro-life politics. Neither of these women would have been able to taste as much success in national politics without the necessary credentials of appropriately gendered behavior within the family sphere.

For women, occupying the maternal role is important, as is its symbolic progenitor, heterosexuality. A consideration of women’s sexuality, either their desirability as a sexual object (or lack thereof) is always present is the popular discourse. Clinton has long been accused of harboring lesbian tendencies, in spite of the fact that she is married with a child. Many tactics were used to overcome this stigma, including a makeover of her appearance with an emphasis on sexual appeal. Hair and makeup professionals, as well as fashion stylists, plied their trade to shape her appearance toward contemporary beauty standards, removing her glasses, lightening and straightening her hair. Her maternal role and an investment in children were articulated in the publication of children’s books, notably 1996’s *It Takes a Village*, written while she was the sitting First Lady. Her adult daughter, Chelsea Chilton, was ever-present on the campaign trail, speaking on her mother’s policy positions while serving as a living reminder of Hillary Clinton’s participation within a heteronormative family framework. As much as possible, the campaign strove to avoid the dreaded “abject identity” that would doom a candidacy.

Though her marriage was certainly an asset in some circumstances, many have argued that it was Hillary Clinton’s role as former first lady that actually prevented her from being a viable candidate for the highest office in the land. In the collection *Cracked*
Schnoebelen, Carlin and Warner claimed that because of the highly gendered nature of the role of First Lady, she was always a weaker vessel dependent upon her husband for a role in the public sphere. One of Bill Clinton’s biggest challenges during the 1992 primary campaign was showing the public that he had control over his wife, and that there was no danger of a “co-presidency.” Andrew Stephen (2008) in a New Statesman article summarized the two-for-one nature of the Clinton political alliance: “Rarely is she depicted as an intellectually formidable politician in her own right…Rather she is the junior member of “Billary,” the derisive nickname coined by the media for herself and her husband. Obama’s opponent is thus not one of the two US Senators from New York, but some amorphous creature called “the Clintons,” an aphorism for amorality and sleaze.” (pg. 47) Clinton faced the double-bind during her husband’s presidency that she was not feminine enough, yet when in her own campaign, was positioned as being dependent upon her husband for credibility and authenticity. Clinton’s marriage to Bill Clinton played a part in shaping her image and (ultimately) her failure to secure the Democratic nomination.

Clinton’s first television advertisement, broadcast during the Iowa primary campaign, fully embraces the maternal role available to her as a woman candidate. The visuals cut from Clinton walking in a field with a farmer to shots of her giving a speech to a large crowd. Most significantly, shots of Clinton embracing children are intercut through the sixty-second advertisement. Making faces at a baby in his mother’s arms, reading to a circle of school-age children, embracing a man holding his toddler son,
Clinton is shown to exude warmth and compassion as her voice-over shares her vision of a compassionate America:

As I travel around America, I hear from so many people who feel like they’re just invisible to their government.

NARRATOR: Hillary Clinton has spent her life standing up for people others don’t see.

You know, if you’re a family that is struggling, and you don’t have health care well you are invisible to this President. If you’re a single mom trying to find affordable childcare so you can go to work, well you’re invisible too. I never thought I would see that our soldiers who serve in Iraq and Afghanistan would be treated as though they were invisible as well. Americans from all walks of life across our country may be invisible to this President, but they’re not invisible to me and they won’t be invisible to the next President of the United States.

When Clinton went on the attack against her opponent Barack Obama, her campaign attempted to position him as inexperienced and her as the more seasoned candidate. Yet even as they worked to buttress her claims as the more qualified candidate, the Clinton campaign resorted to images of children in peril to make its case. Perhaps the most infamous of her spot ads, the commercial titled “3AM” argues that Hillary Clinton should be a parent’s choice for their children’s security. The spot featured images of peacefully sleeping children, snug in their beds, shot in muted colors. The voice over narration is accompanied by an insistently ringing telephone:

It’s 3am and your children are safe and asleep. But there’s a phone in the White House and it is ringing. Something is happening in the world. Your vote will decide who answers that call. Whether it is someone who already knows the world’s leaders, knows the military, someone tested and ready to lead in a dangerous world. It’s 3am and your children are safe and asleep. Who do you want answering that phone?

The last visual is an image of Hillary Clinton working at her desk, picking up the ringing phone. Though the role of motherhood is not directly invoked, it is easy
enough for the viewer to infer that Hillary’s use of her knowledge of foreign leaders (gained at the arm of her husband during his presidency) in defense of sleeping children is maternal in nature. As well, the narrator’s use of the second-person tense to address the audience (“your children are asleep” and “Who do you want answering the phone?”) situates the appeal as one that is only directed at parents, others who fall within the privileged domain afforded to parents, those guardians of American future. Once again, campaign communications have excluded those who fall outside of the heteronormative frame of the nuclear family.

Hillary Clinton directly claimed the privileged position of motherhood when reflecting on her efforts to become the first woman President of the United States. In the speech announcing the suspension of her campaign in June 2008, she laid out her claims on the presidency as distinctly maternal:

I ran as a mother who worries about my daughter's future and a mother who wants to leave all children brighter tomorrows. To build that future I see, we must make sure that women and men alike understand the struggles of their grandmothers and their mothers, and that women enjoy equal opportunities, equal pay and equal respect.

Hillary Clinton made her campaign, even in its death throes, intelligible within the narrow confines offered to her. She was a wife and mother, as well as a Yale-educated attorney and a U.S. Senator, but the former two categories were the easiest to frame her candidacy within, even when discussing issues of gender equity.

In an effort to clench voters that were stung by Hillary Clinton’s failure to clinch the nomination, Republican candidate John McCain sought a woman to fill the vacancy on the ballot. As recounted in Heilemann and Halperin’s Game Change, the McCain campaign wanted a woman, hoping that the gender gap could be neutralized, perhaps
even tilted in their favor. When he did choose a woman as a running mate, his choice was an attractive, young mother of five with a vocal stance on the limitation of reproductive rights and a woman’s appropriate and natural place in the domestic sphere. Alaskan governor Sarah Palin was selected largely because of her fulfillment of the idealized role of motherhood.272 Once her selection was announced, Palin claimed that she would be an advocate for special needs children, summoning sympathy gained as the mother of a child with Down syndrome. Palin also used this fact as to gain traction within the pro-life wing of her party, recounting her decision to carry the child to term as a demonstration of her commitment to their agenda. Her pro-life ideology was also buttressed by her vocal support of her pregnant teenage daughter. In fact, all five of Palin's children served as set pieces during her convention acceptance speech where she asserted, "I was just your average hockey mom and signed up for the PTA because I wanted to make my kids' public education better.” Her political aspirations were directly tied to her feminine identity as a caregiver and nurturer. Yet while she was generally able to leverage her role as mother to her own advantage, she was not immune to criticism that she was not properly performing this most vital of roles. CNN's John Roberts took it upon himself to ask whether or not her children would suffer as a result of her ambitions: “The role of vice president, it seems to me, would take up an awful lot of her time, and it raises the issue of how much time will she have to dedicate to her newborn child?”273 There is no record of a national political commentator ever asking a similar question of a male candidate for either the presidency or the vice-presidency.

Some argue that while Palin arguably faced challenges to her candidacy due to

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her gender, she also furthered the hegemonic adherence to male leadership and patriarchal authority. Her investment in the maternal role, her exploitation of her own physical appearance, and her advocacy of policies that undermine women’s agency, prompted to Gibson and Heyes to claim that she adopted a “faux maternal performance,” because “though she crafted a persona of motherhood by employing domestic examples, maternal appeals, and a feminine discursive style, she effectively subverted that persona by joining the RNC’s celebration of hegemonic masculinity.” Yet I would argue that very few other choices are open to female candidates, regardless of party affiliation. Palin did not have a “faux maternal performance,” she fell exactly in line with the role afforded her within the cultural confines of political discourse. It is an unfair assessment to label only the RNC as celebrating a hegemonic masculinity when the female Democratic contender for the presidency exploited the same tropes of motherhood that Palin did. Though the Republican Party does not espouse the subversion of traditional gender roles, Republicans are not alone in their investment in the identity of woman’s true calling as that of mother.

Palin, never subject to these accusations of homosexuality that troubled Hillary Clinton’s public persona instead was presented to the public as a former beauty queen, her physical attractiveness on display. In Palin’s case, argues Sue Carroll, “Sexuality proved to be a blessing in garnering candidate attention and even favorability but a curse in that such attention and favorability were rooted in image over substance and sexuality over politics.” The double-bind continued to stifle Palin even after the campaign.

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275 Carroll And Dittmar, 72.
*Newsweek* included an image of the former governor on its cover wearing short shorts, bearing the question, “How do you solve a problem like Sarah?”, drawing an obvious corollary between the former candidate and a flighty nun from a Rodgers & Hammerstein musical. The subhead claimed, “She’s bad news for the GOP—And for everybody else, too.” With such a threat, there seems little reason, outside of a sexualized appreciation of Palin’s physical form, to feature an image of the former candidate in her athletic attire. As has been established by film theorist Laura Mulvey, the "world [is ordered] by sexual imbalance, [and that] pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.” Sarah Palin is an object to be viewed and manipulated for the enjoyment of the audience, an audience assumed to be both heterosexual and male.

Though Sarah Palin understood the value of her attractive physical appearance, and worked to capitalize it for her benefit, it is difficult to imagine what other possibilities could be available to women candidates. Even Hillary Clinton acknowledged the need to be perceived as physically attractive. But how to navigate the trap of being marginalized as a sexual object and straying too close to threat of the abject identity? “Androgyny is not the answer, for that trips the lesbian alarm. Rather, a woman has to find a way to be undoubtedly feminine (and heterosexual) while having a sufficient number of strong traits that suggest command…The binary is deceptive, for political women are not expected to choose. Rather, they are expected to combine.”

The presidential race of 2008 offers an opportunity to look at the ways that female candidates chose to represent themselves as appropriately feminine while simultaneously

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positioning themselves as possessing the capacity to lead the nation. Political scientist Caroline Heldman’s consideration of the double-bind of cultural barriers to a woman president posed the question, “How can a female presidential candidate fit the norms of beauty culture expected of a woman (in general and in politics) while also projecting an image of heightened masculinity?” The acceptable role of motherhood provided the answer. Both Clinton’s and Palin’s campaigns navigated around the double-bind while simultaneously claiming expertise on domestic and international issues as a result of their experiences as mothers and wives.

Above all, for both men and women, it seems that appropriate gender performance is essential to electability. While men have only a selection of options to demonstrate their manhood, women have even fewer choices available. Rigid adherence to the a set of proscribed, gendered behaviors is required for any candidate. A fitting comparison between a man’s behavior and a woman’s behavior may be found in a consideration of the New Hampshire primaries in 1972 and 2008. Sen. Edmund Muskie, a would-be Democratic candidate in the 1972 election, allegedly broke into tears while responding to harsh criticisms of his wife Jane (portraying her as a bawdy alcoholic) that were featured in a New Hampshire newspaper. Muskie’s campaign quickly faltered when his response was believed to show inappropriate masculine weakness, particularly after the Washington Post claimed Muskie “broke down three times in as many minutes.”

The crying moment offers an excellent point of comparison to examine ideas about appropriate gender behavior. Much has been made of the moment that Hillary Clinton cried at a truck stop a day before the 2008 New Hampshire primary. Behind in the polls,

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279 Heldman, 29.
280 Broder, David, ”Muskie Denounces Publisher,” Washington Post. February 27, 1972.
she emerged from the photo op changed in the opinions of the people. Hillary became more palatable to the electorate after an emotional display. She won that contest, and spawned a comeback that became an extended primary battle with Barack Obama. Rebecca Traister’s book, *Big Girls Don’t Cry* provided an excellent analysis of the incident: “As far as the media was concerned, she was leaking her feeble, funny femininity all over the place. Either that, or she had manufactured the whole episode, fulfilling yet another misogynistic expectation of manipulative femininity.”

The word “human” or “humanized” was repeated in print and broadcast media, but I would argue that word “feminized” could have just as easily been used. Hillary was acceptable because she was performing appropriately as a woman. While Muskie was ridiculed for crying, Hillary was praised. Muskie was feminized as an ineffectual patriarch, with a slandered wife and a weak will. In her New Hampshire victory speech, Clinton claimed that she had “found her voice.”

For all the ups and downs of this campaign, you helped remind everyone that politics isn't a game. This campaign is about people. It's about making a difference in your lives. It's about making sure that everyone in this country has the opportunity to live up to his or her God-given potential. That has been the work of my life.

It should not be ignored that the voice that touched the people was a voice cracking, on the verge of tears. This appearance of emotion, a behavior traditionally associated with femininity, allowed Hillary Clinton to continue on her quest for the presidency for another six months, successfully earning more delegates than any other women in American history. Her “God-given potential” was revealed and accepted through an appropriate, intelligible gender performance.

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281 Traister, pg. 94


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