A Republic of Men

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The American founders aspired to create a republic of men. Their problem was that a democratic distemper infected the men of their time, resulting in disorderly conduct that threatened the republic’s birth, health, and longevity. The founders addressed this problem by employing hegemonic norms of manhood to stigmatize and bring into line disorderly men, reward responsible men with citizenship, and empower exceptional men with positions of leadership and authority. One result was that their republic presupposed and perpetuated women’s exclusion from politics. My thesis is that the founders employed a “grammar of manhood” to encourage American men to reform themselves, to restore order to the hierarchical ranks of men, and to foster social stability, political legitimacy, and patriarchal power.

The American founders’ political aspirations were framed by manhood in two ways. First, the founders sought liberty, equality, and citizenship for American males. They inherited and accepted patriarchal laws, institutions, and values that portrayed politics as an exclusive male enterprise that precluded women’s participation in public life. Theorists such as Louis Hartz and historians such as Bernard Bailyn have presumed that early American political thought was a discourse among men about men. More recently, scholars such as Linda Kerber and Joan Hoff have exhumed the founders’ gendered language to demonstrate that they defined male citizenship in opposition to womanhood. The founders’ original intent, then, was to create and sustain a republic based on male governance and female subordination.

Second, the founders made political distinctions among men. Most obviously, they elevated white males to rights-bearing citizens and at the same time devalued African males as dependents and Indian males as aliens. They also debated the implications of distinguishing propertied and unpropertied males. The English freeholder tradition reserved citizenship for men of substantial property because they alone were trusted to be independent and interested in the public good. But some American leaders suggested that a young man’s
coming of age could be a sufficient qualification for citizenship and that other factors, such as time of residence, family status, occupation, and future prospects, might be taken into account. Ultimately, the founders intended to establish a republic of men based on some men’s rights and authority.

But which men? Simply asking the question suggests that the founders’ rhetoric of liberty and equality should not be taken at face value. Certainly, the founders committed themselves to the democratic proposition that all men were created free and equal and could not be governed without their own consent. Simultaneously, they did not believe that “all men,” or even “all white men” or “all white Protestant men,” could be trusted with equal liberty or equal citizenship or equal authority. They could not imagine a “rankless republic.” Most founders thought the majority of males were passionate creatures who converted liberty into license, perverted equality into leveling, and subverted republican order. Many were obsessed with democratic disorder in the ranks of men and sought to control it.

Whether America’s disorderly males could be trusted with citizenship depended, in part, on whether they measured up to contemporary standards of manhood. Were they able to combine independence and self-restraint? Could they reconcile family responsibility with fraternal civility? Did they demonstrate a capacity to exercise rights but defer to legitimate leaders? There were no easy answers, particularly as the meanings of manhood shifted during the founding era. The ideal of the traditional patriarch was destabilized by significant changes in gender relationships. Americans debated, for example, whether a mature man ruled his family with an iron fist or a velvet glove. Disputed images of manhood were further complicated by nuances of class, religion, race, and region. After the Revolution, evangelicals identified manhood with restored patriarchal prerogative whereas artisans equated manhood with “the assertion of the autonomous individual over and above the patriarchal pretensions of the merchant elite.” America’s culture of manhood was a complex, diverse, and contested arena.

Nevertheless, the subtext of American manhood was remarkably stable. Americans agreed that manhood demanded economic and political independence, or “manly freedom.” They marked out pathways to manhood that commonly passed through marriage and fatherhood. John Witherspoon spoke for his contemporaries when he linked manhood to tempering the passions of “the single life,” recognizing “the necessity of marriage,” and becoming a father who “subdues selfishness” in parenting his children. Americans also defined manhood in opposition to womanhood. Being a man meant governing female dependents and exhibiting the manly virtue and merit that con-
trolled alleged female vices such as deceit and corruption. The consensual core of early American manhood was the conviction that young males should mature into independent family patriarchs who governed female dependents.²

Like most elites, the American founders drew on cultural complexities and consensual norms to establish and maintain their hegemony. In particular, they employed a “grammar of manhood” to promote public quiescence, encourage popular consent, justify leadership, and stabilize political authority. They used gendered language to stigmatize disorderly males and democrats as effeminate and childish, to encourage them to settle into family responsibility and sober citizenship, to foster fraternal trust between citizens and their representatives, and to legitimize the extralegal prerogative of exceptional leaders. The founders’ grammar of manhood functioned as the conservative core of early American liberalism. It was not planned or systematic, but it was sufficiently coherent and compelling to communicate criteria for excluding some males, including others, and elevating a few to political prominence and power.

At times, the founders were self-conscious about relating manhood to politics. Thomas Paine published *Common Sense* to awaken Americans from “unmanly slumbers” and shame men into defending the liberty earned by forefathers, enjoyed by families, and owed to posterity. Stanley Griswold condensed a call for men’s self-discipline against political factionalism by making a plain but pertinent plea: “Oh Americans! Be men.” Most of the time, however, the founders were not self-conscious about using gendered language to explain the political world. They simply found it natural and appropriate, for example, to applaud “this manly, this heroic, and truly patriotic spirit” of American militiamen and to condemn the “effeminate and delicate soldiers” of the British army.³ Self-conscious or not, nearly all founders relied on the grammar of manhood to convey the message that manly courage in the struggle for liberty and manly self-restraint in the exercise of liberty were the essence of republican citizenship. Women need not apply.

Chapter 1 explores the culture of manhood in eighteenth-century America by identifying shifting and stable elements in gender relations that linked the language of manhood to politics. Chapter 2 examines the founders’ grammar of manhood—the hegemonic norms, language, and rules they employed to promote public quiescence and justify leadership. Chapters 3–6 focus on how the founders applied the grammar of manhood to reform disorderly men, restore order in the hierarchical ranks of men, and legitimate political leadership and authority. Chapter 3 looks at “the Bachelor” and other disorderly men who
provoked the founders’ exclusionary tendencies. Chapter 4 discusses “the Family Man” as a symbol of male maturity in the service of citizenship. Chapter 5 considers the founders’ commitment to “the Better Sort” of men as leaders and lawmakers. Chapter 6 analyzes the figure of “the Heroic Man,” whose exceptional manhood and leadership abilities qualified him to exercise an extralegal prerogative to resolve crises and procreate a promising future for posterity. Chapter 7 concludes by considering how the founders’ hegemonic norms continue to order men’s relations, restrain democracy, and devalue women’s place in modern American politics.