The American founders employed a grammar of manhood that distinguished four ranks of men. The lowest rank was symbolized by the Bachelor, the passionate man who was isolated in time and space, distrusted by other men, and deemed a danger to social order and political stability. He was ridiculed, stigmatized, sanctioned, and sometimes imprisoned. The main rank was represented by the Family Man who disciplined passion to fit into the role of responsible husband, father, and neighbor. He merited sufficient respect to be entrusted with citizenship. A more select rank was constituted by the Better Sort of man who sufficiently mastered the norms of manly integrity and civility to earn personal dignity, social respect, and public influence. He demonstrated virtue and wisdom enough to represent other men and make law for them. The highest rank was reserved for the rare Heroic Man who cultivated civic virtue and procreated a new nation for posterity. He stood above law and public opinion to address the exigencies of fortune but secured hegemony to ensure the consent and quiescence of most men.

Fearful of democratic disorder in the ranks of men, the founders employed the grammar of manhood to encourage men to reform themselves, school their sons to exercise liberty with restraint, and restore and reinforce order in public life. They invoked what James Madison called “the manly spirit” to lift up men in each rank and encourage them to defer to higher-ranking leaders. Some founders considered themselves heroes of the highest caliber, extraordinarily procreative men destined to produce a better world for humankind. Their attitude was both arrogant and insightful. Their arrogance was partly based on patriarchal privilege; they could think and act almost exclusively in terms of men’s passions, interests, virtues, aspirations, hierarchies, and authority because they inherited and perpetuated women’s exclusion from public life. Their insightfulness was manifested in their impact; their republic of men proved to be durable and influential.
Durable Manhood

For two hundred years, Americans have struggled with varying degrees of success to extend the founders’ revolutionary promise of liberty and equality. Major successes include the demise of slavery and the achievement of women’s voting rights. However, the relationship between manhood and politics has hardly changed. American males of all races, religions, classes, and regions continue to build hierarchies that stigmatize disorderly men, provide varying degrees of respect and influence to men in the middle, and afford great authority to the few on top. Generation after generation of American boys has adapted to these patriarchal hierarchies, and generation after generation of American men has participated in them.

In his study of American nineteenth-century “boy culture,” E. Anthony Rotundo observes that young males who interacted beyond the immediate oversight of their parents regularly established a “series of informal rankings” that challenged each youngster to earn his place in the adolescent “pecking order.” The most successful boys displayed “independence” through will, daring, prerogative, and force; they learned “to master the emotions that would otherwise make them vulnerable”; and they employed “ridicule, ostracism, [and] hazing” to establish and enforce their hegemony over others. Most boys earned a modest place by exhibiting exuberance and spontaneity, and also disdain for adult authority. Eventually, these middling boys had to make “the leap from boyhood to manhood” by giving up “heedless play for sober responsibility.” Boys lacking proper size, appearance, pluck, or athletic skills sometimes had to fight for their manhood. Those who lost confrontations or ran away from them were likely to be debased as “mama’s boys,” who had failed to separate from females or overcome effeminacy. They suffered an array of youthful cruelties.¹

Today’s boy culture reproduces a remarkably similar pattern. Barrie Thorne’s study of modern gender play suggests that boys’ relationships “tend to be overtly hierarchical.” Boys “negotiate” and “mark rank” by demonstrating admired qualities and by issuing “insults, direct commands, challenges, and threats” to reinforce rankings. High-status boys command widespread respect and deference; middle-status boys jockey to maintain or raise their position; and low-status boys suffer considerable if not constant humiliation. Thorne captures the extremes in this contrast: “John, who was the tallest boy in the class and one of the best athletes in the school, deftly handled challenges to his authority. Dennis, who was not very good at sports or at academics, was at the other end of the pecking order. John . . . called Dennis ‘Dumbo’ and
insulted him in other ways; in a kind of ritual submission, Dennis more or less accepted the insults.” Weaker boys are also humiliated by epithets such as “girls,” “sissies,” and “fags.” High-status boys’ hegemony is based on low-status boys’ consent to subordination.2

Boys become men who participate in and perpetuate adult pecking orders. Joseph Pleck observes that “men create hierarchies and rankings among themselves according to criteria of masculinity” and then “compete with each other . . . for the differential payoffs that patriarchy allows men.” R. W. Connell specifies three general rankings among men: “hegemonic masculinity, conservative masculinities (complicit in the collective project but not its shock troops), and subordinated masculinities.”3 Connell’s hegemonic masculinity is consistent with what I have represented as the founders’ Heroic Man; his conservative masculinities encompass the Better Sort and the Family Man; his subordinated masculinities include the marginal men and minorities epitomized by the Bachelor. In all, the modern rhetoric of liberty, equality, and democracy has not inhibited American men from complying with a seemingly iron law of male oligarchy: a few men rule, the majority of men consent and obey, and marginal men mostly accept subordination.

Why do American men perpetuate these hierarchies? One factor is that high-status males believe they must govern, in order to prevent disorderly men from destroying life, liberty, and happiness. They applaud powerful leaders who exercise prerogative to resolve national crises and realize historical opportunities. They share patriarchal sensibilities that call for manly leaders to protect women from libertines and other dangerous men. William Goode suggests that men’s emotional ties to their mothers, sisters, wives, and girlfriends provide them an incentive to protect women from the disorderly men who threaten to harm them. These caring men are “sure of their own good-heartedness and wisdom” but fearful of other men’s “exploitatve efforts.” Accordingly, they believe “that they are to be trusted and so should have great power,” but “other men cannot be trusted” and so should be restrained.4 To the extent that high-status men continue to concur with the founders’ belief that most males are disorderly creatures, they locate themselves among the Better Sort who are sufficiently trustworthy to govern the dangerous masses as well as to rule womankind.

A complementary factor is that low-status males have a strong incentive to acquiesce, accommodate, and assent to the male hierarchies that subordinate them. Mark Gerzon asserts that the average American male is fearful that other men will perceive him and treat him “as a boy and not a man.” Powerful men have used this understanding to manipulate others. For exam-
ple, dominant white males reinforced their historical domination of black and Indian males by labeling them “children” and treating them like dependents. Modern leaders still stigmatize enemies by tagging them with male immaturity. President Lyndon Johnson condemned “the talkers and writers and the intellectuals who sat around thinking and criticizing and doubting” as “boys”; but he honored “activists, doers, who conquered business empires, who acted instead of talked” as “men.” Why should any male care if powerful men label him a boy? David Leverenz explains that American males harbor “fears of being humiliated . . . by other men.” And because humiliation often is a forerunner to severe sanctions, the safest strategy for a low-status male seeking to avoid shame and punishment is to conform to ordinary standards of manhood and achieve at least modest respectability in the male pecking order.5

The American consensus on men’s main route to modest respectability has not changed in two hundred years. It still involves independence, family commitment, and governing subordinates. Stable norms of manhood declare that males ought to practice intellectual and emotional autonomy as well as secure sufficient wealth or income to settle down, marry, sire children, rule female and male dependents, and perpetuate family dynasties. This declaration is periodically reaffirmed by critics who first complain that bachelorhood is causing family decline and social breakdown and then call on men to recommit themselves to family responsibility and civic order. Late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century English writers responded to men’s antimaritalism by invigorating demands that men marry and fulfill family duties. Today, American analysts link men’s “flight from commitment” to an antimarital ethic that legitimizes freedom without family responsibility. Both liberals and conservatives criticize American men for failing “to invest time, money, and energy in family life” and advocate a revival of “family values” to encourage men to rebuild the family nest.6

From the founders’ time to our time, American leaders have viewed mature manhood as a remedy for the male lust, licentiousness, selfishness, avarice, impulsiveness, aggression, and violence that foster disorder in the ranks of men. Manly merit still centers on individuals’ ability to discipline their passions, elevate family interests above individual pleasures, and achieve social fit if not seek social fame in the service of the public good and posterity. Although the founders’ rhetoric of liberty and equality fortified a Lockean individualism that gave rise to an ethic of self-made manhood, their devotion to consensual norms of manhood persists into the present to counteract both male individualism and women’s claims to liberty and equality.
**Manhood against Individualism**

The founders’ grammar of manhood favored manly merit, self-discipline, responsibility, civility, and procreativity for the public good. Did it also legitimize the actions of men who harnessed manly characteristics to individual self-interest? The backwoodsman, for example, could exhibit great self-control, family responsibility, and political artistry when he provoked border wars, murdered indigenous peoples, speculated in frontier land, and persuaded the U.S. government and military to support his violence and profiteering. Did the classical meaning of manhood as self-sacrifice and civic virtue give way to masculine individualism, rugged individualism, possessive individualism, or ideals of self-made manhood in early America? Joyce Appleby, John Diggins, and Joan Hoff think so. They argue that the founders stripped “virtue” of its classical civic meaning and reduced male virtue to the pursuit of self-interest.7

Unquestionably, the founders’ rhetoric of liberty and equality helped promote individualism among white males. Rotundo emphasizes that the founders recognized “the growing claims of the self” but “only of the male self.” This recognition helped catalyze the breakup of corporate families and traditional communities, on the one hand, and legitimize individual rights, entrepreneurship, contractual relations, and interest-based politics, on the other. Individualism was also manifested in American fraternal life. Men often bonded to optimize individual and aggregate utilities. They joined the self-help groups popularized by Franklin and the factions neutralized by Madisonian institutions to enhance their social standing, enrich their economic opportunities, and gain political leverage. Wilson Carey McWilliams suggests that the individualism at the core of American fraternities is what made them defective. Men committed themselves to fraternities only insofar as they recognized a congruence of interests; they failed to wed private desires to public ideals in ways that connected self-worth to enduring civic values. Sanford Lakoff adds that American men participated in republican politics only insofar as they connected self-interest to aggregate “public interest.” They failed to join self-sacrifice to civic loyalty in support of the classical “common good.”8

The founders granted white males’ individualism its due. They dwelled on men’s passions, avarice, and factionalism. Bernard Bailyn states that “federalists and antifederalists both agreed that man in his deepest nature was selfish and corrupt; that blind ambition most often overcomes even the most clear-eyed rationality; and that the lust for power was so overwhelming that no one should ever be entrusted with unqualified authority.”9 Simultaneously, their
understanding of manhood and fraternity went beyond selfishness. The founders disputed the Bachelor’s lustful, avaricious manhood and sought to restrain his passions and interests. They worried about the Family Man’s parochialism, encouraged his devotion to neighbors, and pleaded for his loyalty to leaders committed to the public good. Liberal individualism began to flourish in the founding era, but the grammar of manhood countered it with an ethic of self-restraint and subordination in the service of order, stability, and posterity.

Throughout American history, norms of manhood encouraged males to restrain individualism and realize their social nature by committing themselves to family, friends, community, and nation. The founders did not portray male creatures solely in egomaniacal terms. They agreed that men who were individuated and isolated suffered great unhappiness. They also agreed that men’s selfish passions were accompanied by a moral sensibility and natural sociability. The founders admired gregarious men who established informal networks and founded formal organizations that fostered mutual caring and community. For example, early American Freemasonry honored mobility in the marketplace but “also attempted to check the growth of an unrestricted pursuit of self-interest through its concept of itself as a brotherhood, an institution that promoted loyalty and benevolence.” Fraternal orders relied on secret rituals to cultivate male bonding and benevolence. The rituals required initiates and members to demonstrate manly merit by making symbolic and tangible sacrifices for fraternity and the flag. “Rather than reinforcing the forms and ideologies of capitalist social organization,” Mark Carnes suggests, “the rituals often subverted them.”

The enduring association of American manhood and fraternity with self-sacrifice and civic virtue is especially evident in American military thought. The founders believed that men were obligated by their birthright to support and serve in a military capacity to defend liberty and pass it on to their sons. From the early national period to the present, political, military, social, economic, and cultural elites have consistently urged young males to undergo trial by military ordeal to learn self-sacrifice, demonstrate civic virtue, and prepare to risk their lives for their families, friends, and fellow citizens. Elite urging has been especially intense at the beginnings of wars, but it has also been potent in peacetime. For example, early-twentieth-century civic leaders proposed Universal Military Training to transform a generation of ostensibly soft, selfish, effeminate boys into a national force of manly, patriotic soldiers. Despite periodic protests, virtually every generation of young American males has deferred to elites by adopting martial values, performing militia service,
joining volunteer companies, enlisting in the regular army, or complying with conscription.  

To the extent that American manhood has counteracted individualism and its associated disorders, it has played a very conventional role. In *Manhood in the Making*, David Gilmore surveys rites of male passage that stretch from Europe through Africa and Asia across the Pacific Ocean to South and North America. The global similarities are staggering. Nearly everywhere, boys undergo trial by ordeal to develop and demonstrate manhood. They learn self-discipline, stoicism, and fortitude; they take on prescribed responsibilities and perform distinguished deeds; they prove competence through the conquest of women—all this and more to earn their ticket into adult male society. Once admitted, the struggle continues. They become fathers, providers, and protectors of families; and they assert independence from women, for example, by participating in fraternal rituals, war games, and wars. Gilmore argues that most cultures make a virtue of manhood to motivate young males to demonstrate a “selfless generosity” for their families and the public good. This ethic of selfless generosity binds men into relatively cohesive fraternities that enact, administer, and enforce the rules of public life.  

Gilmore is struck by the absence of systematic rites of male passage in the United States. Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette agree that “We no longer have a map to get us to maturity.” Mark Gerzon worries that American males may be lost in the midst of uncertainty because, “There is no ritual—not sexual, economic, military, or generational—that can confirm masculinity.” American manhood seems makeshift, diffuse, and ambiguous. How does a boy become a man? Should his father send him on Boy Scout camp-outs, emphasize academic achievement, push athletic prowess, or consign him to a drill sergeant? Should the boy focus on physical size and musculature, intelligence and wit, fearlessness in the face of danger, or future productivity and wealth? When he comes of age, should a young male cultivate mechanical skills, group leadership, managerial savvy, and then stoic dignity in the aging process? The answers have varied by time, place, religion, region, class, and race. The American road to manhood has crisscrossed traditional patriarchal authority, aristocratic gentility, republican simplicity, and liberal self-interest as well as filial obedience but also filial rebellion, courage and conquest in some circumstances but self-restraint and civility in others. America’s exemplars of manhood have included sober New England Puritans, Georgia dirt farmers, Philadelphia artisans, western frontiersmen, southern cavaliers, northeastern entrepreneurs, small-town Babbitts, white urban professionals, and black professional athletes.  

Does so much variety imply a lack of coherence?
Not necessarily. Three threads of consistency run through the variations. One is that manhood is never given; it must be earned. Each boy has to figure out how to achieve independence, assume and satisfy family responsibilities, and assert authority over women and other dependents in order to gain access to the differential payoffs of patriarchy. Each boy learns, “It takes work to become a man.” Analogously, each male generation must measure up to prior generations. In the War of 1812, Michael Rogin remarks, “America’s sons” sought to “vindicate the birthright of their revolutionary fathers . . . to acquire manly authority.” Gerald Linderman attributes a post–Civil War “re-vival of the military spirit” to efforts by a new generation of males to earn its manhood by waging war against rampant individualism and routine civilian life. In United States history, all white males were born with liberty but only meritorious white males acquired the respect, recognition, and reputation associated with manly liberty.

The second common thread is that manhood demands self-discipline. Peter Filene observes that American males achieve manhood “by earnest, often desperate suppression of instincts.” They must control passions and master impulses to gain fraternal trust as husbands, fathers, neighbors, workers, businessmen, citizens, soldiers, and leaders. In addition, they need to strike a balance between self-interest and social regard. They achieve manly independence and integrity as ends in themselves but also as a means to earn a good name and reputation among worthy men. Moreover, they must continue to exhibit self-discipline and social consciousness throughout their entire life span. A man’s place in the pecking order is always tenuous. He cannot rest on past laurels because competitors are always poised to raise themselves up by bringing him down. Even old men must struggle for manhood. Cotton Mather wrote that they had to measure up to manly standards of “sobriety, gravity, temperance, orthodoxy, charity, and patience” or suffer invective such as this: “For them that stagger with age, at the same time to stagger with drink; to see an old man reeling, spewing, stinking with the excesses of the tavern, ‘tis too loathsome a thing to be mentioned without a very zealous detestation.”

The third unifying thread is that males must procreate to achieve full manhood. The founders’ belief that manhood involved procreating a sober, responsible self reappears in “the great legend of American life” that men can “start over again,” for example, by following self-improvement manuals and twelve-step programs that promise renewed health, virtue, wisdom, and happiness. The founders’ consensus that manhood involved giving birth to families is especially evident among modern men who hire female surrogates to
bear their genetic heirs. The founders’ admiration for men who procreated communities and nations resurfaces among contemporary planners and developers who carve new suburbs out of old farmland, activists who establish community organizations, and subcultures that create their own lifestyle enclaves. The thread of male procreation is especially dense in mythopoetical masculinism. Robert Bly wants boys to tap into “male spirit” to achieve a “second birth” into manhood. Moore and Gillette want the modern man to find “procreative energy” to become “the Procreator”—a father of children and steward of the world whose “blood nourishes the earth as fertilizing semen” to bring “calm in the midst of chaos.” Truly worthy men procreate “order through determined action.”

Why do modern American men weave these traditional threads of manhood into their personal, social, and political lives? One answer is that the founders set a powerful precedent when they used the language and norms of manhood to stabilize male identity, secure social order, and legitimate new governments amid the sweeping changes of the late eighteenth century. Since then, new generations of American males have forsaken some of the language of manhood but continue to rely on its consensual norms to give meaning to mortality, fit into fraternal society, fix their place in the pecking order, and share in the heroics of leaders seeking calm amidst chaos. The founders’ commitment to manhood now constitutes the conservative core of contemporary liberalism.

Manhood and Mortality

By the eighteenth century, Phillipe Ariès argues, a profound change occurred in Western men’s attitude toward death. Premodern men shared a sense of collective destiny. Death was familiar, not fearsome. Men were socialized to accept nature’s order and expected to live on through their communities. With the rise of individualism, modern men began to put a premium on self and material interest. They saw death less as a natural part of their collective destiny and more as an assault on their individuality and accumulated treasure. Death became “a transgression” that ruptured the fabric of men’s lives and plunged them “into an irrational, violent . . . world.” How did men cope with impending rupture and chaos? They gave meaning to mortality by perpetuating the memory of the dead. Ariès observes, “Memory conferred on the dead a sort of immortality.”

American colonists refused to surrender to death. The common man sired
sons to continue his seed, name, and memory into the next generation while the gentleman also performed notable deeds meant to be remembered by worthy friends and countrymen. This refusal outlasted the Revolution and nationhood. American men still hoped to cheat death by protecting and promoting family dynasties that honored the memories of dead patriarchs and paved the way for future ones. They sustained patriarchal memories by paying hyperbolic homage to family fathers and civic fathers. They initiated prolonged funeral watches in formal family parlors; the watches were occasions to honor dead patriarchs and the parlors were architectural testaments to the deceased’s gentility and patrimony. They also generated memory-laden options for disposing of paternal corpses. Some sons cremated fathers, gathered the ashes into urns, and placed the urns on home altars; others invested in the American revival of the ancient Egyptian art of embalming to transform dead fathers into durable cadavers; still others buried fathers in new-style cemeteries that marked family plots with engraved stone monuments that proclaimed family surnames in perpetuity. Individual efforts to memorialize family dynasties were mirrored by public efforts to honor dead heroes with durable stone statues.18

Most American men sought to perpetuate family dynasties by fathering sons to carry their seeds, names, estates, and memories into the future. Jay Fliegelman notes that eighteenth-century Americans adopted Lockean parenting techniques that were especially conducive to men’s search for immortality. A Lockean father educated his sons to steward the family dynasty. He used affection and discipline, praise and shame, and reason and emotion to teach boys appropriate manly virtues and abilities. When he died, the father would “be immortalized in his child,” who would continue the family line. Alternatively, grandfathers hoped to immortalize themselves in their grandsons. For example, American men occasionally drew up wills that bypassed sons and sons-in-law in favor of grandsons. New Yorker David Haines “named his grandson and namesake” his primary heir, while one Chesapeake man hoped to protect his estate from a wasteful son-in-law by bequeathing it to as yet unborn grandsons.19

This fondness for male procreativity as a source of immortality was rooted in biblical imagery of male fecundity that reemerged in seventeenth-century England as political philosophy. Referring to Sir Robert Filmer’s argument that “Eve . . . is not created ab initio but from Adam, who is thus in a sense her parent,” Carole Pateman comments, “Filmer is able to treat all political right as the right of the father because the patriarchal father has the creative powers of both a mother and a father . . . who is complete in himself.” English con-
tract theorists refuted Filmer by transferring male procreativity from a single patriarchal father to the fraternity of patriarchal fathers who, by mutual consent, “give birth to an ‘artificial’ body, the body politic and civil society.” A subtheme was that founding fathers immortalized themselves in their biological and political offspring. James Harrington suggested that a man became a father to “raise himself a pillar, a golden pillar for his monument . . . his own reviving flesh, and a kind of immortality.” The founder of a republic created “beautiful order out of chaos” to raise an even grander monument to himself. John Locke also joined procreativity to immortality. He attacked “waste” and “spoilage” as squandered value but applauded labor and money for enabling men to procreate value, amass it without spoilage, and cheat death by bequeathing it to future generations. In turn, men safeguarded accumulated value by procreating a political society able to protect it.20

The American founders linked male procreativity and immortality when they praised men who founded and fostered family dynasties; acquired, settled, worked, and bequeathed land; established fraternal organizations and communities; and procreated new constitutions and governments. The founders’ descendants continue to identify male procreativity with immortality. Modern Americans often pity bachelors who have no legitimate biological heirs to perpetuate their names but honor responsible fathers and doting grandfathers who procreate and provision new generations. They applaud citizens who earn reputable names and elect national leaders who promise to do memorable deeds. Indeed, American males of all classes and races are experts at the “Remember Me” game. Boys carve their names into school desktops and wet cement; youth gangs and tagger crews spray-paint their names onto neighborhood fences and highway overpasses; construction workers etch their names into steel infrastructures; rich men donate millions to have their names attached to college buildings and charitable foundations; and powerful politicians (such as the Kennedys and the Bushes) transmit clout across generations to affix their family names to political dynasties.

Why have American males been so concerned with memorializing themselves? Mary O’Brien suggests the possibility that men tend to be obsessed with immortality because they play a minor, temporary part in human reproduction. Men copulate, ejaculate, and then remain idle while women carry, bear, nurse, and nurture future generations. The result is that men feel separated from the birthing experience and from any affective sense of biological continuity. They are “isolated in their individual historicity.” Seeking to escape this isolation, men commandeer culture, law, and coercion to reduce the uncertainty of their paternity and to build family dynasties that promise to fill them
with a sense of historical continuity. Their desperation is evident in the extraordinary amount of time, resources, energy, and effort they invest in legitimizing patriarchal prerogative and fixing their places as fathers of posterity.

Robert Jay Lifton proposes a related possibility. He believes that men have a deep psychological need “to maintain [them]selves as part of the great chain of being.” To satisfy this need, men “require the symbolization of that continuity, imaginative forms of transcending death, in order to confront the fact that we die.” Lifton identifies five symbolic modes of transcending death. In the biological/social mode, men seek continuity by identifying with their children, group, tribe, organization, culture, people, nation, or species. A religious mode assumes that men have an immortal soul and can achieve life after death. The creative mode enables men to endure through their works of art, literature, and science or through their influence on family and friends. The fourth mode involves men's identification with nature as an eternal force that precedes and postdates individual lives. Finally, an experiential mode refers to intense psychic experiences that temporarily free men from fear of death. J. Glenn Gray provides a useful example. He observes that combat soldiers sometimes experience a “sense of power and liberation” when risking their lives for comrades. It is as if “nothing less than the assurance of immortality . . . makes self-sacrifice at these moments so relatively easy.”

O’Brien defines the male quest for immortality in opposition to female maternalism, but Lifton is ambivalent. On the one hand, he observes that women who survive major historical discontinuities such as Nazi concentration camps and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima employ the same strategies as men to reaffirm life and reestablish a sense of continuity. On the other hand, he speculates that women’s “close identification with organic life and its perpetuation” may produce in women an “organic” conservatism that steadies them during times of change. On this view, women’s relative calm in the midst of crisis stands in contrast to men’s anxiety over the ebb and flow of fortune. Lifton does not resolve his ambivalence. However, he does allege that men are deeply threatened by disorders associated with change, crisis, and death, and that they engage in strenuous efforts to reestablish a symbolic sense of continuity and immortality.

These efforts often involve the procreation of surrogate families. Throughout American history, young men torn from their biological families to fight the nation’s wars have been initiated into substitute military families (units) that include brothers (fellow soldiers) and father figures (officers) who promise to lead them to victory. Since the nineteenth century, young men migrating from farms to cities have joined extended families that formed in
home-styled bordering houses, institutions such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and fraternities such as the Order of Odd Fellows. Lifton perceives men’s tendency to procreate surrogate families as especially intense during revolutions. A rebel might sustain a sense of continuity amid violence by identifying himself with “a vast ‘family’ reaching back to what he perceives to be the historical beginnings of his revolution and extending infinitely into the future.” He participates in “a socially created family . . . as a mode of immortality.” His family is often governed by a beloved father figure. Lifton suggests that Chinese revolutionaries perceived Mao Tse-tung to be a heroic patriarch who could transform “the most extreme threat of disintegration into an ordered certainty of mission” and convert “incapacitating death anxiety into a death-conquering calm of near invincibility.” He believes, however, that Western men are more apt to feel a sense of “symbolic fatherlessness” and engage in endless experiments to reconcile patriarchal norms that give meaning, significance, and stability to their lives with the frightful openness and uncertainty of the future.24

An important element in the American founders’ gendered legacy was a challenge to future generations of males to reconcile the relatively unchanging norms of manhood that ordered men’s lives with the rhetoric of liberty and equality that justified openness but admitted uncertainties associated with social instability and political disarray in the ranks of men. Both the founders and their heirs addressed this challenge by employing criteria of manly merit to encourage self-restraint in the exercise of liberty and to establish stable hierarchies in civil society.

**Manhood and Civil Society**

The founders felt that most men’s standing in civil society depended on their performances as family patriarchs and neighbors. Fatherhood was a social responsibility. A proper father, John Demos observes, raised his sons to “reflect credit” on him and his family’s “good name.” He also mastered local codes of civility to confirm membership and achieve respectability in his community.25 Civility was a particularly useful marker of a man’s standing in a society where formal ranks were being contested and abolished. It was an equal opportunity virtue. Theoretically, every white male who sought social recognition could learn the appropriate dispositions and exhibit the proper manners needed to climb the social ladder. At the same time, civility legitimized hierarchy. Some men never learned the basics; most men achieved adequacy; a select number
picked up important subtleties; but only a few men mastered its intricacies. Because the common man had a chance to gain a “foothold in the ranks of polite society,” he was less likely to resent subordination to social elites and more apt to respect social superiors as “models of manhood” worthy of emulation. Don Sabo reminds us that intermale hierarchy usually beckons low-ranking men “to climb its heights” rather than contest its inequalities.26

The founders’ commitment to civility as a key criterion for social standing was symbolized by their elevation of George Washington to the highest rank of manhood and highest office in the land. Washington the child entered rules of civility into his copybook, and Washington the adult practiced those rules to attract extraordinary public esteem. Richard Bushman reports that great concern for civility resurfaced among nineteenth-century patricians hoping to save gentility from democracy as well as in nineteenth-century advice books that counseled aspirants to middle-class respectability to develop and practice pleasing dispositions that elevated character and improved business prospects. The ethic of civility endures in the twentieth century among upper-class men who cultivate country-club manners, entrepreneurs who seek social respectability, and professionals whose codes of ethics announce their commitment to employ expertise to serve rather than to exploit the public.27

The manly ethic of civility is especially important among minority males and other marginal men. Mitchell Duneier’s study of “race, respectability, and masculinity” reveals the intricate codes of manhood, self-worth, and social standing that ordered relationships among a group of older, mostly African American men who frequented a restaurant on Chicago’s South Side. These men articulated and adhered to masculine norms of speech, style, and action that honored personal responsibility, inner strength, expressiveness, pride, sincerity, honesty, genuineness, caring, and civility. The men who excelled at these virtues perceived themselves and were perceived by others in their circle as manly, meritorious, respectable, and dignified. They took great pride in being known as men of “higher self-worth,” as “elevated” beings. In contrast, those men who failed to exhibit civil dispositions and manly conduct suffered personal pain and social disdain. They staked their personal honor on norms of manhood and punished themselves for falling short; they were accepted into the group on the basis of these norms but lost status and even membership for failing to live up to them.28

Relatedly, a group of elderly Jewish immigrants who belonged to a community center in Venice, California, created their own informal codes of civility. Barbara Myerhoff examines how members tried to maintain a sense of personal integrity and social dignity as they coped with the dependence asso-
ciated with old age and with fears founded on proximity to death. “Their self-
estee,m,” Myerhoff writes, “was based on the maintenance of honor, decorum, and dignity.” Their particular code of honor included self-discipline, independence, articulateness, and generosity. For example, members took pride in being donors to needy causes but were deeply insulted by the merest hint that they themselves were needy. This insistence that they controlled their lives “enabled them to maintain their standing as people of honor” committed to the “American values of democracy and equality.” Simultaneously, they greatly valued “individual merit,” perceived “clear, important differences in human worth,” were acutely attuned to small and large breaches in civility, and staked their dignity, membership, and reputations on earning and maintaining high social standing in the group.29

Duneier’s study focuses on an all-male community where the prevailing codes emphasized manhood and civility as key sources of social standing. Myerhoff’s study examines a community of men and women, emphasizing the importance that family played in determining people’s standing. She suggests that “the old women had the deck stacked in their favor” because they kept closer ties with children and received the most credit when the children were highly educated, well married, and good parents. Still, men achieved social standing by asserting responsibility for and demonstrating achievement in perpetuating their family dynasties. One elderly man wrote an autobiography which he intended to be read at family gatherings after his death. He explained to his children that the book’s purpose was “to draw out the thread of our family, in order that your children and grandchildren will have some understanding of their origins.” The author gained social credit by bequeathing to his family “the concept of perpetual continuity.”30

The norm of manly civility persists today as a putative source of fraternal cohesion. Moore and Gillette suggest that mature men are not selfish, materialistic, or aggressive. Instead, they are genuinely concerned about other people, cooperate with them, and sacrifice for them. Mature men care—about their children, other men, the community, the environment, the world, and posterity. Mature men who engage in legitimate state violence care—about the liberty and safety of their families and the friendship, camaraderie, and mutual aid of fellow citizens, police officers, or soldiers. Mature men fearful of social disorder and street violence care—about the triumph of civility over criminality. The point is not that American men are caring creatures but that they often associate mature manhood with concern and sacrifice for others. Garrison Keillor explains in The Book of Guys, “We try to become caring men, good husbands, great fathers, good citizens, despite the fact that guys are fun-
damently unfaithful.” The men most likely to achieve high standing in American society are not necessarily radical individualists, sexual predators, abusive husbands, ruthless capitalists, or highly authoritarian personalities. Instead, they tend to be men who subscribe to the very ethic of care that Carol Gilligan identifies with women.31

**Manhood and Politics**

Mainstream manhood is mundane. It involves settling into monogamous marriages, siring and raising children, earning money and paying bills. It is the daily grind of restraining lust outside marriage and exercising responsibility within it, winning bread and breeding heirs. Mainstream citizenship is passive. It entails listening to television news, obeying laws, paying taxes, and periodically voting. The one transcendent feature of both manhood and citizenship is an indirect association with heroism. Average American men can vicariously experience “the magnetic field of the deep masculine” by identifying with the procreative “Zeus energy” of heroic men and hegemonic leaders. They may imagine themselves heroes but, in politics, they mostly seek out heroic rulers to solve public problems and fulfill national promise. American men tend to couple mundane manhood and passive citizenship to compensatory hero worship.32

Since the founding era, few American men have sought to transform liberty into radical libertarianism or to push equality toward radical egalitarianism. American men have rarely used liberty as a pretext for contesting the legitimacy of the U.S. Constitution or promoted equality as a gateway to socialism. With important exceptions, they have mostly complied with laws and leaders, and occasionally offered enthusiastic support to presidents who exercised extraordinary power and prerogative. Eugene Debs recognized and regretted American men’s tendency to sacrifice democratic self-government for passive quiescence to leaders. He regularly refused to assume official Socialist Party leadership and gave this explanation: “Too long have the workers of the world waited for some Moses to lead them out of bondage. He has not come; he will never come. I would not lead you out if I could; for if you could be led out, you could be led back again.”33 Ironically, Debs’s refusal, like Washington’s reticence to accept public office, made his leadership that much more influential, lasting, and memorable.

Does this record of political passivity imply that the founders’ obsessive fears of disorderly men were exaggerated? Louis Hartz thinks so. He argues
that early Americans and their leaders were “united on a liberal way of life” that focused on individual rights and economic opportunities. The founders’ attempt to ensure order by installing a powerful national government was political overkill. Hartz states, “The American majority has been an amiable shepherd dog kept forever on a lion’s leash.” Gordon Wood disagrees. He suggests that the founders’ fears were warranted but their new science of politics suppressed much of the disorder. The founders implemented a Constitution that freed men’s acquisitive appetites but harnessed their political ambitions. Henceforth, American men pursued their economic interests with little reason to seek political power or resist political leadership. Both explanations are incomplete because they do not recognize that the founders’ hegemonic norms of manhood helped stabilize liberal citizenship and authorize exceptional leaders to override institutional restraints.

Early American liberalism contained a conservative core requirement that mature men give up the Bachelor’s pleasures for the Family Man’s responsibilities. This was crucial for establishing and maintaining order in the ranks of men. The Bachelor sought liberty without responsibility whereas the Family Man defended liberty and exercised it with self-restraint. The Bachelor transformed liberty into licentiousness but the Family Man practiced a sober productivity and fraternal civility. The Bachelor knew no authority but his own desires while the Family Man recognized, admired, and followed the Better Sort who managed the Republic and the Heroic Man who guided it into the future. Ultimately, the Family Man was a political moderate who could be trusted to practice disciplined individualism and deferent citizenship. His moderate disposition, in turn, created a cushion of legitimacy that enabled great leaders to wield prerogative regardless of adverse public opinion or legal restraints.

The Family Man’s mundane manhood and passive citizenship acquired transcendent meaning through hero worship. The Family Man shared in manly heroism not by emulating it but by honoring it, for example, in Fourth of July orations that commemorated pioneering fathers. The Family Man engaged in political procreativity not by exemplifying it but by adoring it, for example, in election sermons that traced modern citizenship back to heroic founders of cities, constitutions, and republics. This version of hero worship encouraged men to find political meaning primarily in the past rather than to take heroic initiative in the present. By 1783, the founders were enjoining men to “venerate the memories and long perpetuate the names of those who guided the helm throughout the storm.” After 1789, Michael Lienesch notes, the founders sought to secure political stability by suggesting that “heroic politics
existed only in the past, the duty of Americans being to revere the founders, remembering their illustrious deeds, applauding their magnificent government, and cherishing their hallowed Constitution.”

Nineteenth-century males did not resign themselves to a mixture of mundane manhood and reverence for dead political leaders. They also worshiped living heroes such as the Jacksonian frontiersman and the Gilded Age entrepreneur. These new ideals incorporated old norms such as manly liberty and procreativity but lacked the key characteristic that elevated manhood from the secular to the sacred: self-sacrifice for the public good. The frontiersman and the entrepreneur were possessive individualists who, at best, made a self-interested, circuitous, and suspect contribution to the public good. Only the citizen soldier could claim the civic virtue associated with unselfish patriotism—but he was about to be replaced by the professional soldier. By the end of “the Masculine Century,” many commentators feared, American manhood not only was routinized, bureaucratized, and effeminized but also was lacking in redeeming heroic value.

The turn of the twentieth century witnessed a conjuncture of political radicalism and renewed emphasis on heroism. American elites dreaded the prospect of millions of American and immigrant men exchanging citizen passivity for the class conflict manifested in anarchist, populist, and socialist activism against the capitalist order. Elites deployed economic policy, political co-optation, and military coercion to control activists but they also initiated efforts to educate and channel young men away from political engagement into a sort of subdued heroism. They called on boys to recapture the frontiersman’s fortitude by participating in planned Boy Scout outings; they counseled youth to exhibit the entrepreneur’s competitiveness in organized sports; they urged young men to practice martial virtue by enrolling in military training programs. National elites were convinced that long-term stability in the ranks of men required that young men infuse greater meaning into manhood by participating in managed heroics.

William James and Randolph Bourne agreed that American men craved transcendent political meaning. However, they expressed pacifist fears that the glorification of heroism often reinforced and legitimized young men’s most aggressive, violent, warlike tendencies. Their solution was to devise a moral equivalent to war that would engage young men in self-sacrifice, develop their procreative abilities, and allow them to experience real heroism by way of public participation and service. They proposed that young men enlist in a domestic army and devote several years of their lives to solving the nation’s problems. Their proposal was quickly forgotten amid public enthusiasm for Pres-
ident Woodrow Wilson’s decision to bring the United States into a world war that invited a new generation of young males to “enact and repossession” the martial manliness of their fathers, forefathers, and founding fathers.38

American men’s hero worship is now manifested in a desperate and often fruitless search for great political leaders. The founders set a precedent when they encouraged contemporaries to suspend their suspicions of political authority and submit to the exceptional leadership of the procreative men who bloodied the British Empire, gave birth to the Constitution, sired a new republic, and nursed it through its infancy. Since then, American men have submitted to patriarchal presidents (often military heroes) who promised to unite manly “restraint and responsibility” with “masculine, potent caring” as a way to resolve national crises and realize historic opportunities.39 Today, American men still search for great political leaders only to suffer a sense of disappointment and betrayal. But rather than invigorate liberty and equality by emphasizing democratic self-government over leadership, most American men appear to prefer to seek out new political heroes who promise, once again, to infuse manly virtue into public life.

Remember the Ladies

The American founders died suspended in time and space. They did not know if their republic would undergo classical declension into corruption, followed by anarchy and tyranny, or whether their innovative government would endure into posterity. Thomas Jefferson expressed optimism just before dying. Unable to travel to Washington, D.C., to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, he regretted missing the opportunity to meet with “the remnant of that host of worthies who joined with us that day in the bold and doubtful election we were to make for our country between submission or the sword.” However, he was gratified by the “consolatory fact that our fellow citizens after half a century of experience and prosperity continue to approve the choice we made.”40 The founders were convinced that democratic disorder in the ranks of men was the primary threat to the Republic and they were proud that their procreative efforts secured sufficient hegemony to restore and reinforce order in the ranks of men.

Simultaneously, the founders believed that public order required the rule of men over women. Eighteenth-century America’s complex, diverse, and contested culture of manhood magnified familial and social instability. In part, the founders addressed problems of male disorder and gender conflict by
urging men to assume familial responsibility for governing women. They defined manhood against womanhood, assessed male worth in opposition to female vices, expressed misogynist attitudes that demanded male governance, and effectively depoliticized patriarchal rule over women. Most founders did not consider women in their political deliberations. Instead, they presumed an exclusive unity of manhood, citizenship, and leadership that precluded women from public life. The few founders who wrote about women and politics usually did so to degrade and dismiss women or to use women to make a point about men. Overall, the founders showed almost no interest in confronting issues involving women’s freedom and equality, or their citizenship and leadership. Not surprisingly, they ignored Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, or criticized the author’s reputed immoral conduct, or dismissed her ideas as invitations to chaos.41

The founders perpetuated patriarchalism by promoting a misogynist ideology which held that a mature man affirmed his selfhood by mastering female depravity and governing dependent women. The very concept of selfhood was gendered. “When influential thinkers of the late eighteenth century pondered the growing claims of the self,” Rotundo writes, “they thought only of the *male* self.” A few thinkers such as Judith Sargent Murray spoke in favor of women’s autonomy, but their voices were subdued by patriarchal laws and customs that required women to sacrifice subjectivity for the good of their families and nation. This normative conjuncture of male selfhood and female self-sacrifice was justified by social contract theories that expanded men’s rights, economic opportunities, and political participation and by what Carole Pateman calls the implicit sexual contract that reinforced female domesticity and subordination. The result, Joan Hoff argues, was that the founders created an enduring republic that recognized male autonomy but required women’s selfless devotion to men.42

Nonetheless, many founders were ambivalent about the war between the sexes. They relied on men to defend liberty but praised women for their “manly exertions” and “patriotic zeal” in the cause of liberty. They enjoined men to practice civility in society but appreciated women who excelled at the “disposition to please,” which elevated both “men and women above the brutes.” Furthermore, some founders were convinced that men did not monopolize rationality and women were not wholly consumed by passion. They recognized women’s potential for reason, promoted female education, and speculated on women’s intellectual equality with men. Meanwhile, most founders dwelled on men’s desires, impulses, avarice, and deceitfulness. Even relative optimists such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson worried
about men’s tendency to submit to lust, alcohol, gambling, profligacy, luxury, factionalism, and other vices. In a complex culture of manhood where gender boundaries blurred, gender opposition became a somewhat slippery foundation for patriarchy.43

One of the most innovative aspects of the founders’ gendered legacy was their expropriation for manhood of traditional female vices and virtues. The founders attributed disorderly passions and procreative potentials to both men and women. Their distrust of the Bachelor as a symbol for disorderly men was a variation of traditional patriarchal fears of disorderly women. Their support for the Family Man as a sober citizen was an adaptation of the conventional belief that marriage subdued female passions. Their praise for the procreative leadership of the Better Sort and the Heroic Man represented a male usurpation of women’s unique ability to give birth. Men were just like women—but even more so. This quantitative difference was decisive. If men were more disorderly than women, then disorderly men posed the greater danger to the Republic and deserved the highest political priority. If men were more procreative than women, then procreative men positioned themselves as the most qualified people to restore social order and secure political stability. The founders’ legacy to posterity included the belief that disorderly men were the main problem of politics and procreative men were the nation’s main problem solvers.

The founders inherited the traditional portrait of women as lustful, manipulative, dangerous creatures. However, they expressed a heightened awareness that women’s vices were regularly reproduced among men. Most founders recognized that both women and men were disposed to seduce and were vulnerable to seduction. Noah Webster criticized lustful women who manipulated men’s passions and deceitful libertines who preyed on female innocence. He worried that the example of “artless females” who were victimized by rogue lovers was being repeated among male citizens who were seduced by silver-tongued demagogues. Most founders also recognized that women and men shared other failings. Benjamin Franklin condemned women’s intemperance and men’s “more frequent” intemperance. He cursed women’s fickleness and berated men’s “wavering and inconstant” disposition. John Adams criticized women and men who exhibited affinities toward “luxury” and related “dissipations.” Both sexes needed an education in virtue to resist luxury, but not the sort of education that produced the equally “contemptible characters” of the “femme savant” and male “pedant.”44 Overall, the founders believed that both sexes were composed of disorderly creatures.

However, these disorderly creatures were not equally subversive of social
stability and political peace. The female “coquette,” for example, was a minor irritant and secondary source of social conflict. Her selfishness, vanity, and flirtations threatened her own well-being more than anything else. Hannah Webster Foster’s novel *The Coquette* told the story of a self-described “young, gay, volatile” woman who refused a virtuous suitor for “a designing libertine,” who eventually impregnated and abandoned her to a premature death. By contrast, the founders believed that the male rogue epitomized men’s “ambitious, vindictive, and rapacious” nature. His passions, impulses, and interests threatened not only his own health and happiness or the fortunes of a few families but also larger social bonds and legitimate authority. Recall John Adams’s reply to Abigail’s request to “remember the ladies.” John ridiculed Abigail’s concern for women but expressed grave fear that the male disorders brought on by the revolutionary struggle had “loosened the bands of government everywhere.”

The founders’ front-line remedy for disorderly men was an adaptation of the traditional prescription for disorderly women: marriage. Both the Family Man and the Goodwife encountered religious, cultural, and legal pressures to channel lust into marriage, contribute to the family economy, share responsibility for child rearing, and practice civility in community affairs. Patriarchal family life afforded husbands the authority to manage their wives’ passions and authorized pious wives to monitor their husbands’ morals. During and after the Revolution, the founders thickened both men’s and women’s marital responsibilities by adding a layer of civic duty. Husbands were to defend their rights, families, and country while wives were to serve as republican mothers who educated sons to become “virtuous citizens of the republic.” The founders encouraged men and women to enter into family life, but their foremost concern was to get young males settled into marriage, family responsibility, and fraternal society to ensure family patriarchy, social order, and sober citizenship.

In turn, the founders hoped to shield sober citizens from social conflict and political disarray by expropriating women’s procreativity. Their grammar of manhood declared that male procreativity superseded women’s reproductive powers. Procreative men sired sons; women simply carried them. Procreative men produced and protected liberty, mixed their blood with the land to generate moral value and economic wealth, and established social bonds that created civil society; women simply enjoyed the fruits of men’s liberty, labor, and society. Procreative men framed constitutions, established governments, and ran them; women simply lived under them. The founders believed that a few heroic men monopolized the extraordinary procreativity needed to father a re-
public and transmit it to posterity; they used the language and concepts of manhood to encourage most other men and require all women to acquiesce to their leadership.

More than two hundred years later, American politics still privileges problems associated with disorderly men. These problems include domestic crime and international conflict. The main perpetrators of violence in both arenas are disorderly men—from thieves and murderers to terrorists and dictators. American leaders give priority to addressing these problems, often in the name of protecting innocent women. A usual result is to trivialize matters related to women’s liberty and equality. When innocent bystanders are getting killed in drive-by shootings and American soldiers are put in harm’s way, issues involving domestic abuse or reproductive rights readily become back-burner items. Equally important, American politics still favors male procreativity as a primary source of public policy. Men’s preferred means to address national problems is to identify and rely on a few heroic men to assert hegemonic leadership, for example, to conquer crime and win war. Manly leaders who exhibit a proper combination of resolution and tenderness, integrity and civility, and self-discipline and selfless generosity can count on most citizens to comply with their initiatives. To the extent that men are still seen as the principal problem and problem solvers in American public life, the founders succeeded beyond all expectations to establish an enduring republic of men.