2001

Changing ideal of manhood in late-nineteenth century America

John Robert Van Slyke

The University of Montana

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.
Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/5359

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

**Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature**

Yes, I grant permission

No, I do not grant permission

Author's Signature: [Signature]

Date: 12/27/01

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.
The Changing Ideal of Manhood in Late-Nineteenth Century America

by

John Robert Van Slyke

B.S. University of Wisconsin - Madison, 1996

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

December 2001

Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

Date
On March 30, 1898, President McKinley wept while telling a colleague of Congress' attempt to force the U.S. into the Spanish-American War. In a span of six weeks, beginning with the sinking of the Maine in Havana harbor, popular fervor had swelled for an assertion of strength and courage befitting an emergent world power. Yet, even after formal investigations revealed that an external mine had triggered the explosion, McKinley continued to advocate restraint in addressing the delicate situation in Cuba.

After months of spirited debate between dovish arbitrationists and their jingoist counterparts, the latter succeeded in portraying McKinley's deliberation as a deficiency of backbone. The curious emphasis upon backbone epitomized the President as lacking a decisive, forceful character, capable of enacting its will. Popular criticism mounted, citing a lack of "manhood in the White House" that rendered its leadership "lame, halting, and impotent." McKinley took the critique to heart while Congress heeded the nation's call for war.

But not all of the spin was critical of McKinley's reluctance to act. His supporters staked the high ground, stressing the President's "great calmness" as superior to the jingoists' desire for "passion" and "revenge." Numerous arbitrationists applauded...

---

McKinley’s “firmness and strength of character” as dignified and statesmanlike.\(^3\) For those still doubting McKinley’s deliberate tack, advocates touted his “splendid record” as Civil War soldier in further defense of his manhood and integrity.\(^4\) Despite these efforts, McKinley’s abiding concern for public opinion, coupled with a fear of relinquishing control to Congress, led him to declare war on April 25 to the approval of Capitol Hill and the nation at large. Thus, after weeks of painful speculation in which he saw his manhood and the political power of his nation placed under siege, the exhausted President relented. But McKinley’s acquiescence was not an admission of cowardice; rather, it was a rational accommodation of the changing climate he confronted.\(^5\)

Why were men like McKinley so disconcerted by the media campaigns preceding the Spanish-American War? It may seem rash to affix a single answer to this loaded question. Nonetheless, there is one explanation that warrants detailed consideration. Throughout the final decades of the nineteenth century there was a crisis of manhood that transformed the male ideal in America. Gail Bederman, in *Manliness and Civilization*, credits this period with effecting a shift from the term “manliness” to “masculinity” in characterizing turn-of-the-century manhood.

---


\(^3\) “Keeping Cool,” *Baltimore Sun*, March 1, 1898.
The former implied a moral dimension of manhood as an "honorable, highminded" ideal rooted in the Victorian attributes of sexual restraint, a powerful will, and a strong character. The emergent masculine ideal, by contrast, represented the "characteristics of the male sex" that differentiated men from women. Beginning in the final decades of the nineteenth century, this evolution of convention yielded a male standard that increasingly embraced "aggressiveness, physical force, and male sexuality." Thus McKinley, representing the manly ideal of the Civil War generation, encountered profound opposition from a new generation that espoused a masculine ideal rooted in more virile demonstrations of manhood. As such, the assaults upon the President's manhood, viewed in the context of a changing male paradigm, made war almost imperative to his effective leadership.6

Developments in the final decades of the nineteenth century—the closing of the frontier, unprecedented immigration and the emergence of industrial capitalism, and the advent of imperial

---

4 "The President's Defamers," Rochester Democrat and Chronicle, March 9, 1898.
5 Hoganson, American Manhood, 106.
6 The Century Dictionary: An Encyclopedic Lexicon of the English Language (Century: New York, 1890), s.v.v. "masculine," "manly." Going a step further, Bederman's use of masculine to describe turn-of-the-century manhood is invoked to differentiate between those things pertaining to men versus women, for example, "masculine clothing," a "masculine gait," or "masculine occupations." The term therefore exists as a "relatively empty, fluid adjective devoid of moral or emotional meaning," as quoted in Gail Bederman, Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995): 18-19. The term manhood, for the purposes of this paper will be used as a neutral reference to the
conquest-- comprised the defining challenges of the young nation. scholars like bederman have recognized that a cross-over from manly to masculine manhood took place throughout this period, but explanations for how it happened have been conspicuously lacking. To help fill this void, I will explain how the aforementioned challenges formed a nexus whereby masculinity supplanted manliness in the psyche of American men. In charting this transformation, I will explore how (1) anxiety wrought by the closing of the frontier and (2) a changing political framework, served to alienate men from past constructions of manhood. In light of these breaks from standards of manliness, I will conclude by trying to demonstrate how this shift placed men, increasingly, on a masculine trajectory of aggressive resistance to women’s assertiveness, which emerged with greater scope and frequency at the turn-of-the-century.

Post-Frontier Anxiety

When Frederick Jackson Turner announced the closing of the American frontier to an assembly of historians at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, he merely formalized what

---

many scholars of his day already knew.\textsuperscript{8} By proceeding to attach to the bygone frontier an end to “the first period of American history,” however, he prompted his countrymen to think more seriously of what the event boded for the nation’s future. In an era of economic and political strife, Turner’s formal interpretation of the 1890 census returns gave definition to a post-frontier anxiety emergent in the final decades of the nineteenth century. For Turner and like-minded scholars, the settlement of the frontier provided the key to America’s favorable development – “to the evolution of American democracy.” As such, the frontier became the cornerstone of American exceptionalism, just as its closing concluded a unique chapter in the nation’s emergence.\textsuperscript{9}

Turner believed that the frontier experience imparted the defining traits of democracy. The process of western settlement,
Turner contended, "master[ed] the colonist." To appreciate this advance - "the men who grew up under these conditions, and the political, economic and social results of it" - was to appreciate the truly American part of the nation's history. In short, by adapting to the material realities of the frontier, Americans became a new cultural species as "organs in response" to a novel environment, free from historical imitation. For Turner, then, the frontier provided the unique stage upon which Americans learned their most defining and noble characteristics.

The importance of the frontier to the nation's development brought a corresponding fear of its pending absence. A number of social critics feared the looming end of the frontier in the final decades of the century and the theme permeated the periodical literature of the time. *The Nation* noted the danger as early as 1880: "The great progress of this country has taken place within the past twenty years, owing to the rapid settlement and cultivation of Western lands; and we have been going on as if there were to be no exhaustion of the impelling force." With the rapid disappearance of land, the editorial continued: "At the present rate
of settlement the desirable free ‘homestead’ lands will probably all be occupied before this decade has ended.”

This alarm continued into the 1890s when, just prior to Turner’s proclamation, C. Wood Davis asked more specifically what the closing of the frontier meant to the anxious nation:

When we reflect that the prime factor in the unexampled prosperity of the United States, and our comparative freedom from many of the social and economic problems long confronting Europe, has been the existence of an almost unlimited area of fertile land to which the unemployed could freely resort; that, practically, such lands are now fully occupied, and that such occupancy has occasioned a sudden halt in the westward movement of population at the line found to the extreme western limit of profitable agriculture, it may be well to inquire what changes are likely to result from the exhaustion of the tillable portion of the public domain.

For Davis, as for others, the imminent passing of the frontier and its ameliorative function prompted widespread concern. Thus, by the time of Turner’s emergence a profound anxiety regarding the nation’s loss of public lands was already in place.

Initially, Turner was less dour than his predecessors regarding what the closing of the frontier meant for America. He was convinced that “the legacy of a pioneering spirit of competition and individualism would buoy citizens in a frontierless America.” Turner cleaved to two elements capable of sustaining American democracy in wake of the frontier’s passing. First, the moral and political legacy of the frontier had imparted an abiding

---

ideological consensus, firmly rooted in the democratic ideals of the nation. This, Turner contended, would retain the virtues of the frontier despite its absence. Second, Turner asserted that the West and Midwest, by pursuit of their sectional interests, would preserve the frontier as a potent force in representing regional politics. In this sense, Turner’s death knell of the frontier included a eulogy that softened the loss of an era deemed critical to America’s development.

But Turner’s optimism was soon eclipsed by a widespread post-frontier anxiety. The heroes of Turner’s story were not the “great captains” or men of “daring,” but rather “the small entrepreneurs, artisans, and farmers, the little men in their average and aggregate.”

This broad agency gave the frontier experience its distinctly democratic character. Likewise, it sowed the seeds for anxiety in the wake of Turner’s proclamation. The close of the nineteenth century witnessed widespread depression, mass unemployment, and urban decay. American men had always celebrated their democratic institutions, but now saw them flouted

---

by urban boss governments and anarchists. Where they once
dreamed of an America immune from violent industrial labor
conflicts, men now confronted a nightmare of railroad strikes
(1877), the Haymarket Square riot (1886), the Homestead Strike
(1892), and the Pullman Strike (1894), not to mention western
confrontations evident in the gold-mining strikes at Coeur d’Alene
and at Cripple Creek (1892-94), and Coxey’s Army (1894). Thus
even before he spoke them, Turner’s assurances of the residual
effect of the frontier rang hollow.\textsuperscript{16}

With one of the factors that had spurred the nation’s growth
evaporating, Americans of the late-nineteenth century concluded
that the other -large-scale immigration- was no longer beneficial.
For decades immigrants had proven critical in pushing the frontier
further west. They fueled railroad and canal construction, supplied
man-power to nascent industries, and, in general, satisfied the
country’s demand for unskilled labor. However, as Western
homesteads grew increasingly scarce and urban decay spread
throughout the East, nativists increasingly identified their foreign-
born counterparts as scapegoats for many of the nation’s problems.

This discontent sharpened by the 1880’s and 1890’s in
response to demographic changes in U.S. immigration that featured

\textsuperscript{15} Richard Slotkin. \textit{Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-
a swell of southern and eastern Europeans. These "new" immigrants troubled many Americans by their perceived differences. Generally, they were poorer than their predecessors, which exacerbated the decay of urban centers. Likewise, their disproportionately Catholic and Jewish composition posed threats to an otherwise Protestant society. Moreover, they were largely unskilled and uneducated; their ignorance of American convention threatened to drive down wages while diluting democratic institutions. Above all, they looked different; they were not Anglo-Saxons and, as such, they represented a different "race." 17

It is important to note how the timing of anti-immigration hysteria coincided with a widespread anxiety about the disappearance of the frontier. In the 1880's and 1890's new social, economic, and political pressures combined with perceptions of a dwindling public domain to prompt concerns regarding the ability of America to Americanize its new arrivals. As the issues converged, a growing number questioned whether or not an unchecked right of immigration represented "an abstract theory" for whose sake the country was "sacrificing [its] great advantage of

17 Maldwyn Allen Jones, American Immigration (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960): 37, 178-183, 192-193, 230, 257. For a nuanced treatment of Manifest Destiny in the U.S. as a gradual shift from a celebration of superior institutions based on historical innovations of the "Anglo-Saxon" peoples, to that of the innate superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race, see Reginald Horsman,
elbow room [while] risking [its] national character." This confluence gave rise to less democratic solutions to the problems confronting the nation, a process that likewise prompted a fresh construction of American manhood.

As already suggested, Turner's frontiersman mirrored Jefferson's husbandman as "the rock upon which the American republic [or, in Turner's case, the democratic ideal] stood." The western settler, situated in isolation, embodied Jefferson's "rural virtue" while transforming the wild into the agrarian. This model approximated the honor-virtue of the manly ideal in mid-nineteenth century America. By the final decades of the century, however, the closing of the frontier and resultant anxieties linked to immigration gave way to a more aggressive construction of manhood.

Perhaps no one embodied this turn toward masculinity better than Teddy Roosevelt. He entered the political scene in 1882, at age twenty-three, as an assemblyman from Albany, New York. Almost immediately, Roosevelt realized that in order to play 'a man's part' in politics he would need to overhaul his image. Newspapers ridiculed his effeminate voice and aristocratic

---

dress by contriving aliases such as "weakling," "Jane-Dandy," and "Punkin-Lily" to stunt his lofty aspirations. Undaunted, Roosevelt invoked a successful public relations campaign to transform his perception as "dude" in becoming the "quintessential symbol of turn-of-the century masculinity." Roosevelt's bildungsroman featured his retreat to South Dakota following the tragic death of his wife in 1884 and, more importantly, the adoption of a new discourse of civilization, which became a hallmark of his political career.

Bederman's scholarship is of use here. She identifies the nineteenth century *discourse of civilization* as a highly variable dialogue with the potential to serve the interests of numerous social groups. At its root, the discourse sought to answer what behaviors and assumptions, on the part of individuals and society as a whole, were worthy of the term, *civilized*. Despite its broad potential, civilization tended to be construed so as to maintain the class, gender, race, and political authority of middle- and upper-class white, American men. Nonetheless, because *civilization* was subject to the vicissitudes of a broader dialogue, it became more "a process of articulation" than a set of fixed formulations or points. Its lack of definition left the discourse open to constant challenge. Conservative chauvinists, militant feminists, white racists, and

---

black resisters all sought to increase their power by shaping the discourse of civilization to best meet their needs. As Bederman points out, the importance of civilization was not what it meant so much as how participants in its discourse used it to "legitimize" wide-ranging claims to power.²¹

For Roosevelt, civilization's cultural power derived from linking beliefs about gender, race and millennialism. By yoking male supremacy to white supremacy and defending both as critical to human perfection amidst the Darwinian struggle, civilization presented male power as both "natural and inevitable." Roosevelt viewed American men as actors in a millennial drama of "advancement" vis a vis their "racial inferiors." To demonstrate this "virility as a race and nation," Roosevelt implored American men to take up the 'strenuous life' and strive to advance civilization—"through racial violence if necessary."²² Roosevelt fused manliness and masculinity by rendering honor synonymous with aggression in spurring American men to wage an international battle for "racial supremacy."²³

²¹ Bederman, Manliness and Civilization, 23.
²² ibid., 23-7, 171. Roosevelt defined the "strenuous life" as a "life of toil and effort, of labor and strife; ... that highest form of success which comes, not to the man who desires mere easy peace, but to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph." Theodore Roosevelt, speech before the Hamilton Club, Chicago, April 10, 1899, published in The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses, (New York: The Century Co., 1911): 1.
²³ Bederman, Manliness and Civilization, 25-27; The stakes of Roosevelt's civilization requirement were evident in his later statement: "Courage, hard work, self mastery, and intelligent effort are essential to a successful life...Only
The frontier of the American West provided the object lesson in Roosevelt's civilization discourse. Whereas Turner's frontier stressed independence in learning manly, democratic virtues, Roosevelt's highlighted the masculine duty to assert one's self on behalf of civilization. The challenge for Roosevelt came in linking a legacy of competitive traits to the frontier. He served this end, in part, by celebrating the hunt as a metaphor for American success. For Roosevelt hunting provided a "training school for war," which honed the frontiersman's skills and explained his success vis a vis the Indians. For Roosevelt, then, the frontier ceased to be a mere safety valve and instead became a virile proving ground for civilized manhood.24

In addition to his 'race-war' fantasies, Roosevelt's civilization project contained an explicit class-bias. The social ills that accompanied the influx of new immigrants indicated that civilization could no longer be a function of American identity, but rather American process. Since the frontier provided the mechanism of Americanization, it followed that only participants in that experience could identify themselves as "the distinctive and intensely American stock." This distinguished the frontier persona

---


from its more passive counterpart, the eastern agrarian. Roosevelt's equation thus laid the groundwork for class division on the basis of western enterprise versus eastern subordination.25

In this sense, Roosevelt's construction of civilization mirrors Annette Kolodny's gendered interpretation of both psychological and cultural development by which the ambivalent child (or civilization) seeks to differentiate itself from the mother. She asserts:

[the child] repeat[s] a movement back into the realm of the Mother, in order to begin again, and then an attempted (and not always successful) movement out of that containment in order to experience the self as independent, assertive, and sexually active. Where the maternal embrace is not so overwhelming as to thwart that movement the [child] either erupts with an expression of violence—as the seductive embrace is rejected—or with guilt, as [he] begins to perceive what has resulted from the single-minded cultivation and mastery of the virgin continent.26

For Roosevelt civilization in America required the frontier's essential themes of "regeneration through regression, isolation, and savage war."27 Moreover, the spoils of this civilizing process fell disproportionately to those who rejected society's maternal embrace through active aggression.

No cultural medium exemplified Roosevelt's civilization project and its response to frontier anxiety quite like the genre of the Western, which emerged with renewed vigor at the turn-of-the-

27 Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 44.
century. Precursors to the Western existed in the stories of James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, Francis Parkman, and a host of other literary talents. But intervening changes in the eastern perception of the West’s civilizing function – due largely to Roosevelt’s efforts – gave fresh import to the turn-of-the-century Western.²⁸ Likewise, it reflects the growing challenges facing turn-of-the-century men and the manifestation of these challenges in the masculine attributes of the genre. Because Owen Wister maintained extensive personal and ideological dialogue with Roosevelt and, likewise, because his novel, The Virginian, is widely-recognized as setting a new course for the Western, his contribution provides a fitting characterization of the genre as a whole.²⁹ The work features a persistent rejection of society’s encroachment upon male agency, a trademark thereafter ensconced in the Western pantheon.

The inspiration for the novel hails from dilemmas in the author’s life.

Owen Wister was, for all practical purposes, an eastern dude. The child of a troubled marriage, he spent much of his life appeasing the “fierce energy” of his mother and the vocational prescriptions


of his father, which led him to abandon his first love, music. After a brief foray into business, in 1885 Wister defied his father by moving west to undertake a career in writing. Soon after, he set his literary talents to vanquishing his remaining ghost, the stifling dictates of his mother. Wister’s resistance to his mother was evident in his equation of her with all the West was not - “society, art, manners, taste, inherited wealth, good breeding, [and] a life of leisure in exquisite surroundings.” These traits coincided perfectly with the excesses Wister, like his protagonist, needed to shed in becoming the consummate westerner.

The narrative of The Virginian extends Wister’s issues with his mother to society as a whole. The Virginian’s wife, Molly, provides the trope for his dismissal of the East’s overly feminine character. Molly represents genteel class snobbery manifest in an ideology of “egalitarianism” that connotes for Wister the “emasculated and intellectually exhausted American upper class.” The Virginian’s courtship of Molly is thus played out as an ideological contest between the “quality” and “equality” elements of the American character, a la Roosevelt’s enterprising and

31 ibid., 59.
32 Tompkins, West of Everything, 143.
subordinate classes. The essence of this social order emerges in the Virginian’s commentary:

It was through the Declaration of Independence that we acknowledged the eternal inequality of man. For by it we abolished a cut-and-dried aristocracy. We had seen little men artificially held up in high places, and great men artificially held down in low places, and our own justice-loving hearts abhorred this violence to human nature. Therefore, we decreed that every man should thenceforth have equal liberty to find his own level. By this very decree we acknowledged and gave freedom to true aristocracy, saying “Let the best man win, whoever he is.” Let the best man win! That is America’s word. That is true democracy. And true democracy and true aristocracy are one and the same thing. If anybody cannot see this, so much the worse for his eyesight.

With a glaring lack of subtlety, Molly becomes the equality of the old aristocracy in Wister’s class equation.

The triumph of Wister’s quality over equality is consummated when the Virginian prevails over Molly in an extended courtship that pits the one against the other. The climax of this struggle emerges late in the novel when the hero asserts independence from the high-minded ideals of the heroine by defying her ultimatum that he desist from a duel with the villain Trampas, or lose her as a result. The Virginian, however, shirks this call to female sensibility and Molly’s boldness undermines her egalitarian agenda as Trampas falls and the Virginian remains, “by love and [Molly’s] surrender to him ... more than ever she could be,

with all that she had."35 This inversion of the societal code, featuring a male persona in active defiance of feminine sensibilities, became a defining trait of the Western genre, a cultural medium that persisted throughout the twentieth century in fortifying the masculine ideal of American manhood.36

Frontier anxiety in the late nineteenth century arose from a dwindling public domain and the attendant perception that America could no longer Americanize its own, particularly the growing tide of ill-perceived immigrants. The transitory climate that resulted allowed men like Teddy Roosevelt to alter the discourse of civilization to accommodate a new class of individuals who, by aggression, asserted themselves atop a revised social hierarchy. Although Roosevelt implied male agency in this new formula, the Western made this point explicit. For his part, Wister solidified the Western as a potent cultural medium by reinforcing male aggressiveness. Consequently, women in Westerns became symbols of eastern excess with limited relevance to the demands of the West, and hence, civilization in general. Thus for men as a whole, the closing of the frontier set off a chain of developments that helped undermine the manly ideal of mid-

35 ibid., 272.

36 For a thorough and compelling discussion of the core attributes of the Western genre and how it functioned as a male response to social change, see Tompkins, West of Everything.
nineteenth century manhood. Masculinity emerged, in part, to help fill this void.

An Altered Political Framework

Having discussed frontier anxiety and its transforming effect upon American manhood, I will now highlight the effect of the changing political framework of the late-nineteenth century in reinforcing the same. The rise of democratic conservatism throughout the latter-half of the nineteenth century spurred this political transformation. It began as a seed, long resting in the American soil, that germinated in the theories and legal doctrines of William Graham Sumner and Justice Stephen Field, respectively, before blooming alongside America's growing embrace of industrial capitalism. By the turn of the century, industrial capitalism's insistence upon property rights had undermined the Jeffersonian tradition's embrace of individual honor.\textsuperscript{37} As such, the shift afforded workers, and hence men, fewer options in maintaining the manly ideal and its emphasis upon individual self-worth. The aggressive response of American men, evident in outbreaks like the Homestead Strike, reflected the

\textsuperscript{37} Put simply, the Jeffersonian tradition's preference for individual honor is most evident in the founder's language of the Declaration of Independence: "all men are created equal, with certain unalienable rights...among th[em] are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." This profound statement of American egalitarianism served to bolster the standing of the average American man for over a century before coming under attack in the mid-nineteenth century by democratic conservatives' overarching concern for property rights.
growing appeal of a more masculine concept of American manhood.

In April of 1897, over a decade after Ulysses S. Grant, the storied Civil War veteran and former President, died, a host of fellow veterans and citizens gathered in New York for the formal dedication of his tomb. The scandal of souvenir dealing that accompanied the event provided a fitting paradox of both Grant and the age in general - his selfless service to country on the one hand, and his political corruption on the other. The disgrace prompted the Civil War generation to wonder if its successors cared more about moneymaking than the virtue of their predecessors. They implored Americans to follow the example of veterans who had forsaken “private ambition, selfishness, and greed of gain” for public service. The call went unheralded, however, as citizens not only failed to follow suit, but enacted subsequent reforms that deemed pensions for un-needy veterans an unreasonable burden for taxpayers.

The rebuff was telling. The mid-nineteenth century’s unpredictable economy demanded a strong character rooted in self-

---

restraint as a prerequisite for men to make their living. Men were
granted or refused credit based on assessments of their character.
Credit raters like *Dun and Bradstreet* evaluated prospective
borrowers on their track records of keeping their word and
providing for their families.\(^2\) This emphasis upon self-restraint
encouraged young men to work hard and live frugally in order to
amass sufficient capital for a small business capable of supporting
a family in moderate comfort.\(^3\) In short, mid nineteenth-century
America espoused an ideal of manliness rooted in individual
honor.

By the 1890s, however, manly virtue was no longer
synonymous with male identity. The manly ideal had evolved in a
crucible of small-scale capitalism, fast receding by the 1890s. In
the “corporatized and bureaucratized” society that accompanied
the rise of industrial capitalism, manly self-restraint brought
diminishing returns. Amidst this transformation the prospect of
individual enterprise for the American male took a hit. The sudden
explosion of entry-level work throughout the economy meant that

\(^{41}\) Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of
\(^{42}\) Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of
the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
1987): 207-8. Although *Family Fortunes* charts English middle-class formation,
it observations, particularly those regarding the significance of manliness in
class identification, are relevant to class formation in the United States; Mary P.
Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York,
\(^{43}\) ibid., 165-85.
men entering the workforce could expect fewer promotions to responsible, more lucrative management positions. As such, manly self-denial and discipline became less profitable. The old ideal echoed its imperatives of hard work and independence, but to limited avail, as manly restraint yielded to masculine aggression in the resulting frustration of American males. For the most part, Americans viewed the 1890s as a dreadful transition from “a simple self-contained, predominantly agrarian society to a more complex, increasingly urban, and industrial one.” The gravity of this shift, then, required the reformulation of basic democratic principles to prove justifiable.

Beginning in 1872, with his ascendance to a Chair of Political and Social Science at Yale, William Graham Sumner set to re-working basic assumptions about democracy in a manner conducive to industrial capitalism. Sumner’s project drew upon ideas already fixed in American consciousness by noteworthy theorists like Locke, Darwin, and Spencer. But his genius lay in resolving inconsistencies at a high point of American anxiety by imparting an invigorating gloss to existing thought. For Sumner, rights, liberty, and equality, provided the touchstones in this reformulation of American democracy. Consistent with his

---

conservative objectives, they assumed meanings in contrast to their erstwhile counterparts under the Jeffersonian tradition. Accordingly, they formed a sturdy ledge for resting property rights, the shibboleth of the Gilded Age.

For Sumner, the idea that rights were a part of man’s natural heritage, as promulgated by natural rights philosophers, was an “exploded superstition.” In his opinion, the ideal primitive condition never even existed. Rights could not be held in nature, Sumner contended, because nature offered nothing save the opportunity for extracting a living insofar as the individual was capable. Bereft of their natural foundation, rights became social constructs, or, “rules of the game” subject to given circumstances. They were contingent upon the individual and far from absolute, derived from common sense and the applied wisdom of “actual life” experience. Thus for Sumner rights were defensible not as moral entitlements, but as societal endorsements of material acquisition.

Liberty likewise lacked moral validity for Sumner. The notion of primitive man’s freedom was a fiction, he believed, because nature was more accurately a state of slavery. Lacking the

47 ibid., 83.
technology to ease the requirements of subsistence, the savage’s life was consumed in struggle.49 Absolute liberty in doing what one pleased was thus impossible because nature demanded that all privileges be offset by the acceptance of inexorable restraints upon the individual. Therefore liberty “in the highest and best sense,” applied only to individual work and achievement. Hence liberty, like rights, extended only as far as society’s defense of capital accumulation.50

Finally, with regard to equality, Sumner was still more skeptical of the liberal democratic tradition’s dependence upon natural rights. He echoed Roosevelt and Wister in asserting that universal equality was “the purest falsehood...ever put into human language.”51 Because all differ in tastes, talents, and powers, even “pure equality before the law [was] impossible.” For Sumner, creating the illusion of equality in either status or material possessions constituted a disruption of societal advance, thereby undermining the foundation upon which society stood.52 The similarities between Sumner and Wister—as far as natural rights are concerned—are evident in the latter’s aforementioned disdain for the “violence to human nature” resulting from “little men”

49 Sumner, *Earth-Hunger*, 139.
50 ibid., 149-50.
51 ibid, 88
being "artificially held up in high places" while "great men" are relegated to "low places" under the liberal democratic formula.  

Without much imagination, one sees how Sumner's formulation of democracy formed a wholesale indictment of the liberal democratic tradition and its notion of rights rooted in a state of nature. As Robert Green McCloskey elaborates:

The Jeffersonian theory of democracy was based upon spiritual and humane, rather than material and economic, values... [Jefferson's] chief interests, in short, were the 'rights' of the individual to realize his moral personality, and not the rights to buy, sell, and prosper economically... When he used the term "liberty," the early democrat meant, first of all, freedom of conscience - moral liberty - rather than freedom of business enterprise... [Finally,] when the revolutionary democrat spoke of equality, he was concerned primarily with an essential equality of men before God, a sharing by all in the same basic humanness.

In this sense, Sumner's gloss of rights, liberty, and equality represented a new interpretation of democracy's core values that effectively "materializ[ed]...community value standards" within the liberal democratic tradition. In all respects, Sumner's formulae favored industrial capitalism and its implicit reliance upon private property. His shrewd logic wrought cracks in the political foundation whereby individual worth fell subject to material acquisition. The transformation helped grease a slippery slope that promoted men's slide from a tradition of honor wherein

---

53 Wister, *The Virginian*, 93.
55 ibid., 20.
they held greater control over the terms of their labor, and hence lives, in falling subject to a more conservative framework that emphasized property rights.

But the mere articulation of conservative ideals was not enough to transform the political framework of late-nineteenth century America. Although Sumner’s logic found currency among a growing segment of the populace, in order to prevail, it required acceptance by the political structure it sought to revise. At the time Sumner began his post at Yale, both the Constitution and Supreme Court’s resistance to democratic conservatism were stolid. But their resistance was short-lived as the high court soon yielded to interpretations more consistent with Sumner’s ideas. Accordingly, the public interest, once secure under the liberal democratic tradition, fell increasingly subject to individual property rights. The career of Justice Stephen J. Field provides a compelling link in this evolution of American conservatism.

Nineteenth century conservatives believed the judiciary, not the popularly elected branches of federal government, should arbitrate the claims of conflicting groups in balancing the “rights of individuals, the sanctity of private property, and the welfare of the community.” Supreme Court Justice Field seized upon this ethos and invoked Sumner’s materialist values in writing legal opinions.

that, over time, elevated the entrepreneur at the expense of majority rule. He began as a dissenting minority, but through persistence and the growing pro-capitalist sentiments of the Gilded Age, prevailed in yoking his conservative bias to the Court’s defining authority of judicial review.⁵⁸

Field’s accomplishment originated in his dissenting opinion in the *Slaughter-House Cases* of 1873. In 1869 the Louisiana legislature passed a law incorporating the Crescent City Live-Stock Landing and Slaughterhouse Company. This law required that all butchering of animals in New Orleans be conducted at the facilities of the Crescent City Company to allow state officials to better regulate the health and safety of the community. Local butchers brought suit as the laws resulted in higher slaughter fees. The issue before the Court was whether the state law violated the property rights of local butchers under the privileges and immunities clause of the 14th Amendment, which asserts that “no state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States.” In a 5 to 4 decision, the Court upheld the Louisiana law.

Justice Samuel F. Miller, arguing for the majority, interpreted the privileges and immunities clause narrowly in stating that it pertained to select rights of national citizenship—property

not among them - that states could not abridge. Furthermore, Miller argued that the purpose of the 14th Amendment (enacted after the Civil War) was to protect the rights of African Americans and not expand the rights of whites. Field dissented, arguing that property rights were in fact among the privileges and immunities protected from state interference by the 14th Amendment. Three colleagues joined Field in contending that the Louisiana law violated the amendment by depriving butchers of property without due process of the law. Moreover, all the dissenting justices rejected the Court's argument that the amendment was designed to protect only the rights of black Americans.59

The importance of the Court's interpretation of the privileges and immunities clause in the Slaughterhouse Cases can not be underestimated. From the standpoint of manliness and masculinity, the matter held special significance. The real question was whether the federal government should protect the general interest in public health or a company's specific interest in unrestrained property rights. If the former, then men could retain a political framework compatible with manliness. The manly ideal, rooted as it was in self-restraint and strength of character, required a political culture capable of reinforcing these attributes; the public

good was an important expression of this ability. By contrast, if
government proved incapable of safeguarding the public good,
men might take this responsibility upon themselves. This would
require foregoing manliness in favor of masculinity in defending
more forcibly their interests against the property interests of the
few. In this sense, the tenuous majority in the *Slaughterhouse*
decision placed the manly ideal in a precarious position.

Although Field’s dissent, by definition, implied a set-back
to his conservative cause, subsequent decisions revealed the
opposite, placing the manly ideal in further jeopardy. *Munn v.
Illinois* (1877) brought the issue of property rights before the Court
once again as the first in a series known as the Granger Cases.
These suits dealt with issues resulting from the rapid growth of
manufacturing and transportation interests following the Civil War.
A number of these companies featured railroad concerns and
operators of sizeable grain warehouses who abused their near
absolute control over hauling and storage by charging exorbitant
prices to farmers. To counter this leverage, farmers developed a
politically powerful cooperative, or Grange. The group
successfully lobbied state legislatures in the Midwest to pass laws
regulating prices, railroads, warehouses, and public utilities, all
tied to the transport and storage of grain.
The railroads and grain warehouses brought suit in the courts, claiming the state regulations were unconstitutional. They rested their complaint on the laws’ abridgement of Congress’s right to regulate interstate commerce, their violation of the Constitution’s prohibition against interfering with contracts, and their violation of the 14th Amendment in depriving businesses of their liberty and property without due process. The *Munn* case thus posed a clear and important question for a nation with rapidly developing industries: Did the Constitution permit a state to regulate privately owned businesses?\(^{60}\)

Justice Waite, again writing for the majority, ruled in favor of the states by upholding the Granger laws. But rather than rest his decision on the valid grounds that no constitutional question had been raised, he held instead that the businesses in question were subject to regulation because their operations “affected [them] with a public interest.” Justice Field again dissented, arguing as he had in the Slaughterhouse Cases against the majority’s invasion of private property rights, which he said were protected against state power by the due process clause of the 14th Amendment. The assertion reinforced his belief that “state police power” could not be used to regulate private businesses.\(^{61}\)

---


Munn v. Illinois represented another slight to Field's conservative project, but with an important exception. Unlike four years earlier, the majority was now willing to accept that the Constitution should acknowledge some limitations upon the states' regulation of private property. The recklessness of a contrary interpretation was accepted, "and the basic premise that the property right is ultimate" was now "fuzzily" embraced.62 Proof of this development emerged a decade later when, in the unanimous decision, Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad Co., the federal courts granted corporations standing as "persons" under the 14th Amendment. In a tribute to his persistence and the nation's growing embrace of capitalism, Field's earlier dissents hit pay-dirt as Sumnerian conservatism at last permeated the American Constitutional tradition.

The Santa Clara decision resulted from the state of California's attempts to collect taxes owed by the Southern Pacific and Central Pacific railroads. Advocates for the railroad companies claimed, as had the petitioners in Munn, that the due process clause of the 14th Amendment made the state tax against them unconstitutional for depriving them of property without due process. The question before the Court was whether a corporation's rights were defensible in the same way as a person's.

62 McCloskey, American Conservatism, 79-80.
The Court did not directly address the 14th Amendment issue in its opinion. Signaling a major shift in the Court's thinking, Chief Justice Waite asserted even before hearing oral arguments that the jurists would not deal with the question of whether 14th Amendment equal protection applied to corporations. They were already "of the opinion that it did." Having thus established that corporations would henceforth enjoy legal standing as "persons," the Court proceeded on the narrow issue of whether the state of California could tax fences on the railroad companies' property. The jurists decided unanimously against the state, ruling that its tax laws constituted a violation of corporate rights under due process. Hence the Santa Clara decision amounted to a de facto validation of Field's conservative logic. By using the due process guarantees of the 14th Amendment, the resulting opinion confirmed that corporation lawyers were now able to protect businesses from numerous state regulations put forward on behalf of the public good.63

In many respects, the conservative project of William Graham Sumner and Justice Stephen J. Field mirrored the civilization discourse of Teddy Roosevelt and Owen Wister; both elevated private enterprise above universal equality. But there were critical differences. Whereas Roosevelt and Wister drew upon the

unique and demanding environment of the frontier as the agent in distinguishing society's 'quality' from its 'equality,' Sumner and Field suggested a new 'frontier' of industrial capitalism in effectively doing the same, with private property the gauge of individual enterprise. Proving one's masculinity by meeting the requirements of the rugged West was adapted to the industrial East in a transformation that protected private property rights and --by implication-- the subordination of labor in validating a privileged entrepreneurial class. "The health of [this] new corporate order required the willing subordination of worker to manager," and of public interest to "corporate necessity." In this sense, civilization's traditional emphasis of restraint fell, increasingly, to a Rooseveltian discourse emphasizing the vigor, in this case, of eastern entrepreneurs. Thus in a new political framework where workers lost autonomy to close supervision, they struggled to preserve a sense of personal significance. Masculine expressions emerged on both sides of the material divide as the enterprising

64 Slotkin, Gunfighter, 19.
65 Chambers, Tyranny, 34-5. Although his ideas were not popularized until his publication of The Principles of Scientific Management in 1911, industrial engineer Frederick Taylor presented "time-and-motion" studies as a scientific justification for what became industry's decisive control over labor. Promoting a managerial hierarchy that highlighted efficiency, Taylor's findings separated "the mental component of commodity production from the manual," thereby further depriving the worker of honor within his profession. David Montgomery, The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor, (Cambridge: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1987): 251, 252.
and subordinate classes clashed in defense of their interests within an altered political climate.

The Homestead Strike of 1892 helps illustrate the displacement of manliness by masculinity in the working class of the late-nineteenth century. It demonstrates not only the difficulties workers faced in setting the terms of their labor, but also the aggressiveness that followed. In June the Carnegie Steel Company, the world's largest steel manufacturer, refused to renew the union contract governing its central plant in Homestead, Pennsylvania. After members of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers, representing the plant's skilled workers, refused to dissolve their union, the company locked out the entire 3,800-man work force. On July 5 it imported 300 Pinkerton guards to enforce its plan to commence operations with nonunion labor.

In the wee hours of the following morning, worker lookouts spotted barges carrying guards up the Monongahela River, prompting a militant reaction that captured national attention. When the Pinkertons landed in hopes of securing the plant so it could be operated by replacements, shooting broke out on both sides and casualties quickly mounted. The unionists had a better strategic position and, firing from behind makeshift fortifications
on higher ground, they effectively trapped the guards. Workers bombarded the Pinkertons with cannons, a flaming railroad car, and volleys of dynamite and fireworks. Their relentlessness paid off as soon after the Pinkertons surrendered amid promises they would not be harmed. But despite the best efforts of union leaders to ensure their safety, the guards ran a gauntlet of infuriated workers and townspeople who insulted, beat, and humiliated them as they proceeded out of town.68

In spite of their spirited battle the Homestead workers lost the war. Horrified by the unrest, Pennsylvania Governor Robert Pattison ordered the state militia to occupy the town, which it ruled through October in cooperation with Carnegie Steel.69 By the time the troops left, the mill had resumed production with non-union labor, forcing the workers to end the strike.70 Though a dramatic showing, the feeble position of unionists was evident in the profits the company gathered despite the tumult. For that year, the company netted $4 million and, by 1899, having weathered the storm of union resistance, Carnegie Steel was averaging a cool $30 million. James H. Bridge, a Carnegie scholar, surmised the strike’s significance in terms friendly to industry. No longer would “the method of apportioning the work, of regulating the turns, of

---

68 Ibid., 34-6.
altering the machinery, in short, every detail of working the great plant...[be] subject to the interference of some busy body representing the Amalgamated Association.\textsuperscript{71} The end result of the Homestead Strike, like its many counterparts around the turn of the century, signified a turn toward what many workers and citizens viewed as a new form of slavery. The shift marked a new political framework characterized by laborers' economic and social subservience to industrial capitalism.

Events like Homestead, although political in nature, had a profound impact upon the male psyche. Senator John Palmer, an Illinois Democrat, put it well in responding to the spectacle: "Within my lifetime, I have seen marvelous changes. There was a time when individualism was the universal rule and men lived alone...because they could support themselves; but matters have changed." Events like the Homestead Strike effectively broke mens' spirit, and revealed employers' growing ability to "manage their business to suit themselves." As a result, the majority of men were left to conclude that "the conditions of life [were] determined by forces too large for them to battle."\textsuperscript{72} Men still fought, but they

\textsuperscript{70} ibid., 90.
resisted more out of frustration than a belief that their resistance was of meaningful consequence.

Aggressive responses to industrial capitalism, however, were not limited to the working class. Men of the middle- and upper-classes experienced their own set of tensions in confronting the altered political framework of turn-of-the-century America, namely, a fear of working-class unrest. To counter signs of growing restlessness on the part of laborers, the bourgeoisie sought more subtle means of harnessing aggression to preserve their advantage within society. The resulting emphasis upon force and strenuousness fed a growing interest in organized youth sports like boxing, baseball, and football.  

Aside from instilling vigor in boys and young men, competitive sports also helped reinforce bourgeois values of discipline and productivity. When boys began competitive sports—regardless of their class—they entered into an organized institution that served as a metaphor for American “success.” Sports instilled an appreciation for teamwork and individual excellence, skill positions and grunts, comebacks and routs, and, most importantly, winning and losing. Regardless of the sport, only a minority would excel and far fewer would reach the exclusive rank of professional. Nonetheless, just by playing, the participant learned

---

the virtues of both competition and subordination within a hierarchical structure such as that espoused by capitalism. Competitive sports provided an object lesson in the importance of trying hard and - when your best is not enough - accepting defeat gracefully.\textsuperscript{74} Organized sports thus became for the bourgeoisie, among other things, a means of social conditioning whereby American males came to terms with, and accepted, their position in society. For privileged males, then, it remained simply to justify their lofty status by defeating their less skilled rivals in the socially sanctioned media of the ring, the diamond, and the field.

The final decades of the nineteenth century witnessed profound change in the political structure of America. The transformation began with the reformulation of democratic principles by shrewd minds like William Graham Sumner that found acceptance in the American legal tradition through persistent efforts by men like Supreme Court Justice Stephen Field. Through these challenges to the Jeffersonian tradition of American democracy, a new conservatism emerged to justify industrial capitalism's demand for property rights at the expense of individual honor and the public good. With the courts' endorsement, a new political framework established itself, evident in men's loss of identity to industrial capitalism. Bereft of a

climate conducive to individual honor, increasingly, working class men embraced aggression in demonstrating their frustration with the revised political order. Despite their aggressive tenor, events like the Homestead Strike were destined to fail. In the process of failing, however, the working class challenged upper- and middle-class men to identify alternatives such as organized sports, in part, to channel the competitiveness of industrial capitalism toward more socially acceptable ends. In short, the altered political framework of late-nineteenth century America produced a pervasive self-consciousness in men that effectively transformed the calm confidence of mid-nineteenth century manliness to a more frantic masculinity forged by conformity to unwelcome expectations.

Female Assertion and Male Resistance

Men in the late-nineteenth century experienced a growing loss of control evident in a post-frontier anxiety and a changing political framework that undermined the erstwhile construction of manliness. They responded through aggression, but their behavior stemmed from an abiding insecurity that left them vulnerable, even paranoid, in the wake of this transformation. I will now focus on how women emerged at this time to further damage --albeit unknowingly-- the fragile ego of the American male. In making
this point, I will likewise address how men resisted these assertions through a more steadfast embrace of the masculine ideal.

Women in the final decade of the nineteenth century lamented many of the same changes as men. Accordingly, they devoted much of their efforts to reconciling modernism with tradition.\textsuperscript{75} As men appeared to abandon manliness to accommodate changes brought about by industrial capitalism, women sought to revive its essential traits by advocating “a genteel style of politics based on intelligence, morality, and self-restraint.”\textsuperscript{76} In doing so, they helped unite much of what democratic conservatism had divided; men of all classes rallied under a common banner of masculinity. They demonstrated this consensus, among other ways, by adopting new terms for deficient masculinity like “sissy,” “pussy-foot,” and “stuffed shirt,” to deplore women’s growing influence while reinforcing more masculine standards of behavior.\textsuperscript{77} For men to lose their honor

\textsuperscript{75} Chambers, \textit{Tyranny}, xxii.

\textsuperscript{76} Hoganson, \textit{American Manhood}, 15. Clearly, not all women joined in filling the void created by men’s abdication of the manly ideal. However, the emergence of the “New Woman” as a fresh presence in U.S. politics and society at the turn-of-the-century provides a meaningful stereotype that offers further evidence of men’s changing perception of women. For a more thorough discussion of the New Woman and her “threat to men’s power and security,” see Arnaldo Testi, “The Gender of Reform Politics,” \textit{The Journal of American History}, vol. 81, (March 1995): 1520-4; The impetus of the growing women’s movement derived from attempts by women to “improve [their] status and usefulness to society” by increasing their role in directing their public and private destinies. Chambers, \textit{Tyranny of Change}, 1.

was one thing, but to have it restored by women was simply unacceptable.

The growing assertiveness of women is evident in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's attempt to alter the discourse of civilization by according women a greater role in civilization's advance. Prevailing wisdom rested civilization's perfection on "elaborate and excessive" differences between the sexes whereby breadwinning husbands provided for their needy spouses. Gilman viewed this as an inefficient arrangement. Accordingly, she proffered challenges to conventional gender roles by highlighting the "evolutionary cost" of women's dependence upon men.

Like other advocates of civilized progress, Gilman viewed human evolution as a teleological process. Since perfection was the all-important end, it was critical that civilized society do everything in its power to achieve it. Gilman believed that the human objective was "progress [and] development":

...we are here, not merely to live, but to grow- not to be content with lean savagery or fat barbarism or sordid semi-civilization, but to toil on through the centuries, and build up the ever nobler forms of life toward which social evolution tends. 78

For Gilman, denying women an active role in this project was to answer the challenge with one of civilization's arms tied behind its back.
In particular, Gilman challenged the notion of sexual distinction as the principal mark of a civilized society. She looked to secondary sex characteristics in nature—physical features like “mane[s], comb[s], wattles, spurs, gorgeous color [and] superior size”—to make her point. Admitting that the presence of these traits allowed individual organisms to reproduce more readily than others, Gilman sought to show how, conversely, their excess would ultimately undermine the self-preservation of organisms as a whole. For example, a peacock could tolerate a tail only so large before that distinguishing feature became an impediment to its primary goal of survival. In short, sexual distinction required a degree of moderation to be truly advantageous. Having thus borrowed from nature, Gilman brought her argument to the discourse of the day by highlighting the limits of civilized society’s obsession with sex-distinction. For Gilman, women in society, like the over-plumed peacock in nature, were impaired by their sexual excess.  

Aside from Gilman’s divergence on the gender issue, her project was not that distinguishable from Roosevelt’s and its emphasis on millennialism and race. She differed only in rejecting Roosevelt’s call for sexual distinction in advancing civilization.

For Gilman, the oversexed, civilized woman — "feeble and clumsy" — embodied the devolutionary effect of women’s, and hence civilization’s, unsung potential. 80 She believed the more energy a culture devoted to sexual differentiation, the less there remained for the more important cultural task of distinguishing the "races." 81 Gilman argued that only civilized races could afford the excess of female indolence; however, by allowing it to persist, "civilized races" risked their advantage by failing to harness their full potential.

Not surprisingly, Gilman’s contribution to the civilization discourse posed problems for men in maintaining their exclusive role within it. Her call for a higher female purpose held a compelling logic that threatened men’s standing at the high point of male self-consciousness. Therefore, Gilman’s project demanded a sound rebuttal to preserve men’s standing in the prevailing discourse. G. Stanley Hall, a prominent social theorist, provided this timely response. And where Gilman viewed the primary threat to civilization as an excessive femininity among women, Hall countered by attributing the problem to a lack of virility among men.

Hall was a professor of pedagogy and psychology who devoted his life to the study of human development. He believed

---

80 Ibid., 46.
in the inexorable advance of civilization under the stewardship of white males, but feared middle-class men's deficient "toughness and strength" in realizing it. The final decade of the nineteenth century witnessed a rise in upper- and middle-class women's influence. This emergence placed a growing number of women in the public eye as volunteers and advocates for expanded suffrage, temperance, and the poor. Women's gains appeared to come at the expense of men; this alone magnified Hall's accomplishment. For just as women seemed to corral what had been an elusive civilization discourse, Hall opened a new gate by arguing that civilization itself was to blame for men's declining influence.

Hall popularized neurasthenics and recapitulation theory in calling for men's return to the primitive virtues of their ancestors. As stated, men of the late-nineteenth century confronted an uneasy intersection between manliness and masculinity. As middle-class ideologies of honor and restraint became less appealing, the manly ideal foundered. Yet while it lost support in theory, it retained influence in the everyday lives of men. Hall sought to change this. Like his colleague George M. Beard, a pioneer in neurasthenics, Hall believed the "increased pace and technological advancement of modern civilization" had exhausted men's "nervous force" by

82 Bederman, Manliness and Civilization, 43.
83 Chambers, Tyranny, 33.
holding their passions in excessive check. In a culture that elevated the "labor of the brain" over "that of the muscles," Hall feared that turn-of-the-century men had weakened their bodies by overcultivating their minds to meet the growing demands of civilization. Society's cultivation of the intellect at the expense of the body had resulted in a drain of men's vigor, rendering them effeminate, feeble, and exhausted. Appalled at this development, Hall sought a new method for raising middle-class boys with enough strength to withstand civilization and its attendant decay.

Hall tried to resolve the paradox of civilization and neurasthenia by advocating recapitulation theory. The erstwhile civilization discourse had framed society's advance in dichotomous terms, pitting civilization against barbarism in elevating whites above "inferior races." But Hall's understanding of the problems facing American men led him to the uncomfortable conclusion that under such a framework, greater civilization would ultimately lead to neurasthenic ruin. Rather than despair of this prospect, Hall took the debate in a different direction. Where his predecessors saw dichotomy, Hall saw a continuum between savagery and civilization capable of

---

84 Bederman, Manliness and Civilization, 85-7.
85 Beard distinguished neurasthenia as a problem unique to overcivilization by citing its disproportionate presence amongst those working at the "desk, pulpit, and counting-room" than "in the shop or on the farm." George M. Beard, American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1881): 26.
86 Bederman, Manliness and Civilization, 95.
replenishing men's vigor. His project required intervention in the earliest stages of male development.

Hall believed the passion of young boys --a vestige of all men's primitive past-- represented the greatest hope for men in an overcivilized world. He looked with dissatisfaction at the current state of young boys:

Something is amiss with the lad of ten who is very good, studious, industrious, thoughtful, altruistic, quiet, polite, respectful, obedient, gentlemanly, [and] orderly...Such a boy is either under-vitalized and anemic...[or] a repressed, ...conventionalized manikin [sic].87

For Hall, this pathetic plight was the result of excessive social programming at too early of an age. He maintained that the natural exuberance of young boys warranted cultivation to instill savage virtues such as physical strength, “feeling, emotion, and impulse,” to counter neurasthenia later in life.88 In fostering this passion, Hall instructed primary school teachers to promote the “half-animal” nature of boys in the classroom and on the playground. By thus transforming the principal mode of social conditioning, young boys would receive an inoculation against the “monoton[y] and narrow[ness]” of civilized existence.89

88 ibid., 2:648.
Hall’s intent was not to produce a nation of primitive boys-turned savage men; it was quite the contrary. Drawing upon Darwin, Hall read into the development of each young boy the whole of human evolutionary history. It was precisely by allowing boys to revisit the savagery of their ancestors in youth that they could evolve from that primitive state throughout their lifetime to become civilized adults. This regression, Hall contended, would allow boys to rediscover the “missing links” of their distant past and amass the necessary character to combat neurasthenia as men.90

Hall’s work with neurasthenia and recapitulation theory, as stated, served to undermine the assertions of women, especially in light of Gilman’s recent challenge to the civilization discourse.91 But what, if anything, did it contribute to men’s uneasy perch between manliness and masculinity? The answer is complex. While Hall admitted a measure of passion and aggressiveness to the development of young boys, he seemed to retreat from the masculine ideal by doing it in the name of more healthy civilized men. Hall’s work provides an important beginning, but the full answer to how men negotiated the manly-masculine divide lies in the intricate politics of turn-of-the-century American imperialism.

My introduction sheds brief light on the pressures President McKinley faced in navigating the dilemmas, both political and personal, preceding the Spanish-American War. However, in highlighting the context of his reluctant declaration of war, it abstained from recognizing the gendered debate that complicated his decision. The growing influence of women at the turn-of-the-century posed unique political problems. In fact, it is difficult to fully separate imperial policy from the emergent politics of gender at that time. In short, men faced a growing need to conceive politics in terms of “honor” due to growing feminist sentiments. At the very least, the reality of this new political climate forced politicians to present their policies in a manner conducive to women’s growing influence. Men felt the pull of conflicting ideals and hence the need to navigate this divide with a newfound caution.

Jingoist imperialists like Senators Albert Beveridge and Henry Cabot Lodge, resting securely in the masculinist camp, viewed war in Cuba and the Philippines as an opportunity for

91 For a fitting sense of how Hall’s recapitulation theory assaulted conventional sensibilities by fostering boys’ primitive license, see “Dr. Hall’s Ultra Views,” Chicago Evening Post, 4 April 1899, 4.

“manufactur[ing] manhood” and rekindling “vigor” amidst perceptions of male degeneracy.93 They seized upon concerns regarding the strength of male character to champion empire building as an opportunity to revive it. But while jingoist rhetoric suggests their intent to elevate masculinity above a worn-out tradition of manliness, there seems to be sufficient evidence that they needed to frame this desire in honorable terms.

In making the case for U.S. imperialism, many jingoists drew upon analogies that elevated Americans’ sense of honor above the arbitrationists’ calls for peaceful resolution.94 Their motives likely rested with preventing the “character of the nation” from falling “to the unmilitary sex,” but this warranted disguise in the altered political climate of the late-1890s. To reach the desired effect, the jingo press often portrayed Cuba’s situation in chivalric terms. Cuban women became damsels in distress, requiring rescue by American knights, while Cuban rebels served as paragons of honor --brave, fraternal, and respectful-- countering Spanish aggression, which sought to hold them in “bondage for lust and brutality.”95 In short, by portraying

---

imperialism fail to account for the impact of gender politics upon the U.S. decision to engage in these wars.


94 It is worth noting that the feminists allied rather predictably with the arbitrationists. Chambers, The Tyranny of Change, 221-2.

95 Matthew Frye Jacobson, Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish Immigrants in the United States, (Cambridge: Harvard
imperialism in manly terms, jingoist illuminati were able to sell their masculine project of strengthening male character to a nation with a lingering insistence upon honor.

Despite the manly tenor many jingoists invoked, the overall rhetoric of U.S. imperialism admitted seemingly sharp contrast between the manly and masculine ideals. Beveridge's call for American imperialism helps illustrate this point:

The question for the young men of this Republic to decide is whether they will enlist with the Republican party, which is harmonious with all those natural elements of youth, of progress and of power and whose foreign policy is the policy of American advance, or with the Democratic party, which is at war with every constructive development of our civilization and whose foreign policy is the policy of American retreat.96

The challenge Beveridge posed laid bare the stakes of U.S. imperialism for men. Whereas American men had once felt free to decide matters by virtue of individual discretion and personal principle, they now confronted a political climate that challenged them collectively. This marked a shift from the deliberate character of manliness, to the masculine imperative of proving one's self on the basis of gender. In this sense, the imperial question played upon men's self-consciousness to the point of supplanting their private judgement.


96 Albert J. Beveridge, “The Young Men of America,” address of Oct. 18, 1900, Albert J. Beveridge Papers, LC, as quoted in Hoganson, Fighting for American Manhood, 162.
When hostilities in Cuba ended in July of 1898, an abiding fear of male degeneracy served to justify America’s retention of the Philippines. But the realities of war soon belied their innocuous billing. Unfortunately for the jingoes, mounting disgust with the methods used to suppress Filipino rebels saw their emphasis upon manliness turned against them. Several problems conspired against the jingoes’ rhetorical scheme. The tropical climate, in addition to promoting untold diseases, brought perceptions of indolence and sensuality, prompting fears of “evils” like prostitution, race-mixing, and outbreaks of venereal disease among American soldiers. Likewise, the army’s harsh methods of quashing the rebellion suggested a fall to barbarism. Almost overnight, the American presence in the Philippines deteriorated from “a glorious opportunity to build manhood” to an unintended path toward its destruction.97

In light of the mixed results of the imperial experiment, one might wonder why the imperial thrust was not abandoned altogether. The answer lies, in part, in the masculine ideal that had taken hold in preceding decades as a response to frontier anxiety and a revised political framework. The tenuous hold of men, evident in their declining influence throughout the 80s and 90s, prompted a sustained effort to retain some semblance of traditional

97 Goran Rystad. Ambiguous Imperialism: American Foreign Policy and Domestic Politics at the Turn of the Century, (Sweden: Berlingska
power. This self-consciousness prompted a headlong push, for better or worse, toward a more dignified status for men in the new national and international order. While the Spanish- and Philippine-American Wars were far from perfect, they were, after all, victories. As such, they were harnessed to help reinforce the otherwise declining position of American men.

The radical psychoanalysis of Alfred Adler sheds additional light on men’s masculine embrace of U.S. imperialism. Although his split with Freud came a decade in its wake, the fact that his theory of masculinity initiated this break is noteworthy.\(^9\) Adler began from the premise that all children, from the start, experience an internal polarity between the masculine and feminine. Because boys are relatively weak compared to adults, this subordination cultivates their feminine character as a counterbalance to the masculine. As they develop, however, in most contexts males learn a cultural preference for the masculine, as the feminine is most often associated with weakness. Neurosis follows as men reject their feminine character due to an abiding fear of physical weakness and inferiority. In Adler’s terms, this gives way to “masculine protest” as men “exaggerate the

masculine through aggression and restless striving for triumphs.”

In the context of turn-of-the-century U.S. imperialism, psychology and history converged rather seamlessly. Jingoists played upon male neurosis and “masculine protest” to promote U.S. expansion while providing Adler a compelling case study in radical psychoanalysis.

That the masculine ideal survived its near collapse at the hands of imperialism is evident in how the U.S. resisted calls for reform by maintaining its claims to the newly-acquired territories of Hawaii, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Cuba following the war. Despite steadfast criticism from anti-imperialists, the U.S. proceeded with its “aggrandizing national design.” Only after the war effort did imperialists yield to anti-imperialist concerns that foreigners were unfit for self-government and thus a danger to American democracy. In doing so, prevailing attitudes of Anglo-Saxon superiority at home and abroad pre-empted calls for a just resolution of the political problems posed by U.S. expansion.

Rather than extend the rights of democracy to foreigners brought under its compass, the U.S. kept them at arm’s length by...

99 Alfred Adler, “Psychologie der Macht,” Gewalt und Gewaltlosigkeit, ed. F. Kobler, (Zurich: Rotapfelverlag, 1928): 41-6, as discussed in R.W. Connell, Masculinities (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 16. In admitting radical psychoanalysis to the issue of men’s embrace of masculinity, I do not wish to elevate it above its historical context. A critical point of Adler’s analysis is that culture plays a significant role in associating the feminine with weakness. I would argue that as honor lost out to aggression in the final decades of the nineteenth century, the transformation afflicted the male subconscious.
extending its demands for labor, markets, and hegemony without admitting territorial inhabitants as “participa[nts] in the conduct of their government[s].” As such, imperial policy embraced the longstanding prejudice that savage races could only be “uplifted” and “civilized” through prolonged and patient exposure to their “racial superiors.”

For the majority of American men, the newly tapped colonies could be of use to America without becoming truly American.

The status of foreigners following the Spanish-American War reveals the emptiness of the manly rhetoric that fed U.S. imperialism. The new territories became, in effect, mere bases of extraction for natural resources and cheap labor capable of feeding aggressive American interests. Jingoists were unwilling to risk political clout by defending the lofty ideals originally put forth to sell U.S. expansion. In this sense, the plight of foreigners in U.S. territories revealed how both the imperial and anti-imperial camps came under the definitive spell of masculinity. As America pursued its imperial ambitions, it abandoned much of the discipline and restraint that accompanied earlier policy considerations.

To compensate for their perceived inadequacy, men harnessed masculinity as a means to discounting the feminine in both themselves and their culture.


102 ibid., 40.
While the decision to do so brought forth a host of unhappy results, American men could overlook these so long as they found consolation in this trade-off. Men's honor suffered but they had already learned the limits of manliness. Accordingly, they further embraced a masculine construction of manhood capable of reasserting the control that manliness no longer provided.

In short, the close of the nineteenth century featured American men at a crossroads. Traditional standards of manhood, emphasizing honor and virtue, were ill suited to the new challenges facing men. Women asserted their growing influence, in part, to compensate for men's abdication of traditional manliness. Charlotte Perkins Gilman reinforced this trend by challenging the discourse of civilization to harness women's overlooked potential. Threatened by this prospect, men sought fresh alternatives for maintaining their traditional power. G. Stanley Hall seized upon this opportunity to resolve the paradox of civilization and "neurasthenia" by promoting the primitive impulses of boys. For its part, U.S. imperialism revealed the gendered nature of turn-of-the-century politics. And while expansion posed new problems, it granted men greater control as consolation for their diminished place in society. Men embraced imperialism, in part, as an opportunity to restore their damaged egos and retain a semblance of their traditional cultural authority. Asserting themselves as
such, men effectively countered the challenges of women while affirming their preference for masculinity as the defining standard of American manhood.

Poor William McKinley; how could he have known? His country had changed so much in a single generation, no wonder he seemed overwhelmed by the situation he confronted. The very standards of honor and restraint that had served him so well in his rise to power became, rather abruptly, liabilities to effective leadership. Late-nineteenth century men faced new challenges, which demanded new standards of manhood. The closing of the frontier had forced them to confront the limits of their independence and re-conceive their relationship to the country as a whole. Not surprisingly, they adapted to this change by trying to retain as much of their traditional authority as possible; distinctions of race, class and gender thus pervaded this transformation. Industrial capitalism emerged alongside democratic conservatism to turn these distinctions against the majority of men by elevating property rights above the inherent value of the individual. Men now confronted a new political climate that rendered them self-conscious, either as subjects or beneficiaries of industrial capitalism. Women employed their newfound influence to denounce mounting obstacles to traditional manhood. But rather
than join forces with women and other less powerful social groups, men proceeded along the path of distinction in an effort to console their damaged egos. Imperialism promised to restore their tarnished manhood, but only with assaults upon their honor. Nonetheless, men embraced it, warts and all, in an attempt to prevail amidst a backdrop of loss. In doing so, men solidified their turn from a manly ideal of restraint and honor toward a masculine ideal of aggression in late-nineteenth century America.