

## CHAPTER 1

## Macho Pulp and the American Cold War Man

IF AMERICANS HAD FOUGHT IN WORLD WAR II to achieve a sense of security, to be free from fear, such peace dividends did not last long. By the late 1940s, the United States once more seemed under assault, from threats both foreign and domestic. As Cold War political lines hardened, the distinction between external and internal menaces became ever more difficult to perceive. Not only was the globe under threat from a vast communist conspiracy – all ostensibly controlled by Moscow, many believed – but the tentacles of communism apparently were reaching deep into American society. Just as threatening, the post-war consumer society appeared to be enfeebling an entire generation of men. It was no coincidence that contemporary social critics spoke of “proletarianized” white-collar workers who were losing their individuality in corporate America. How would such men defend the nation? How could they at once counter communist aggression, at home and overseas, while resisting pressures to conform to a society seemingly intent on emasculating them?<sup>1</sup>

While communist conspirators posed a threat, so too did women. Indeed, American women appeared more menacing than Stalin’s red henchmen. It looked as if female antagonists were attacking men from all sides. Suburban wives and mothers were exercising a “suffocating control” over sons and husbands. *Femmes fatales* stood ready to pounce on unsuspecting men, exploiting female sexual wares to deceive and demoralize.<sup>2</sup> Call girls and mistresses chipped away at the moral integrity of American society. And, in this era of persistent war, female “camp followers” preyed on decent servicemen, a “sinister force” which threatened the nation’s “entire defense programs.” As one account in

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*Real Combat Stories* warned, becoming involved with these “harlots” was to “engage in a game of Russian roulette.”<sup>3</sup>

This general atmosphere of persecution, fear, and distrust of women and other forces that might weaken the World War II-era military man intimidated larger anxieties gripping American society. The designs of global containment, aimed at preventing communist expansion overseas, rested on accepting a healthy dose of fear at home. Fear of nuclear Armageddon. Fear of communist subversion. Fear of men not measuring up in an apocalyptic battle pitting good against evil.<sup>4</sup> Such worries ran deep enough for historian Richard Hofstadter to argue in 1964 that a “paranoid style” in American politics had created a central image in which a “vast and sinister conspiracy” had been “set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life.” Yet these same anxieties – domestic, ideological, geopolitical – were essential to pulp culture writing.<sup>5</sup>

In this era of Cold War anxieties, adventure magazines helped shape young male readers’ world views, driving home an alternative version of masculinity for a mass society seemingly bent on weakening American manhood. They imparted hope for rehabilitation, a way to meet the contemporary challenges besetting the nation’s men.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the pulps’ message was timely. In terms of expectations about sex, gender roles, and the societal responsibilities of both men and women, the period from World War II through the late 1960s saw a great deal of upheaval. The postwar macho pulps thus offered a paradigm for men to embrace, a way to exemplify a traditional sense of masculinity in an uncertain time. Within the magazines, men were once more the unencumbered protector and provider. There, they could bask in gallant stories of the glorified male warrior. And, as one Vietnam veteran recalled, they could return to a heroic time, “before America became a land of salesmen and shopping centers.”<sup>7</sup>

#### COLD WAR ANXIETIES

Despite the unconditional surrender of their enemies in World War II, Americans could not shake a deep sense of insecurity as they entered the postwar years. They worryingly faced new villains. Indeed, they helped to create them. Communist devils conveniently replaced sadistic Nazis and

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savage Japanese as the new foe.<sup>8</sup> The 1950 McCarran Act, for example, declared that the world communist movement posed a “clear and present danger to the security of the United States and to the existence of free American institutions.” In the process, the bill limited civil liberties, requiring all communist organizations to register with the attorney general and authorized the president to proclaim the existence of an “Internal Security Emergency.”<sup>9</sup> Apparently, the nation once more was at war.

Yet what if American men, feminized by the postwar consumer society, could not meet the demands of this new war? What if they had become too soft? These were hardly new questions and, in truth, reflected prevalent concerns over “modern manliness” at the opening of the twentieth century. Then too, men seemed under siege. They were becoming “overcivilized” in this new industrial age, soft and flabby, all while American society was being “womanized” by first-wave feminists demanding political emancipation.<sup>10</sup> This obsession over masculinity, and the challenges to it, may not have reached a crisis, but clearly the opportunities to prove one’s manhood seemed ever more constricted in a decadent, modern society.<sup>11</sup>

The antidote came from the likes of Teddy Roosevelt, charismatic men who advocated living a “strenuous life.” To be sure, only traditional gender relations supported such a rejuvenation. As Roosevelt pronounced in 1899, “When men fear work or fear righteous war, when women fear motherhood, they tremble on the brink of doom.”<sup>12</sup> Men’s magazines of the day took notice, selling the ideals of a physical culture based on sport and outdoor adventure. Such newly reinvigorated men then could transfer their prowess to arenas where it mattered. As *Century Magazine* put it, strong men would no longer fight “in the fields or forests,” but rather “in the battles of life where they must now be fought, in the markets of the world.” It took few steps to marshal this philosophy in support of an expansionistic, if not imperialistic, US foreign policy. Only virile, vigorous men could lead the nation – and the world.<sup>13</sup>

Such gendered language reemerged during the Cold War. Only strong men could steer and protect a strong nation. George F. Kennan, the author of containment doctrine, evocatively portrayed the Soviet government “as a rapist exerting ‘insistent, unceasing pressure for

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penetration and command' over Western societies."<sup>14</sup> By the 1960s, Lyndon B. Johnson was using far less subtle language when it came to US foreign policy. The president derided one administration official for "going soft" on the war in Vietnam, scornfully asserting "he has to squat to piss." Reacting to the late 1966 bombing of North Vietnam, LBJ proudly declared, "I didn't just screw Ho Chi Minh. I cut his pecker off." Yet behind this bravado lurked a chronic anxiety. Biographer Doris Kearns shared with her readers Johnson's fears of being regarded as a "coward" and an "appeaser." To journalist David Halberstam, the president desperately wanted "to be seen as a man. . . he wanted the respect of men who were tough, real men, and they would turn out to be hawks."<sup>15</sup>

To help combat these anxieties, many Americans during the Cold War era turned inward to the family, the "cornerstone of our society" in Johnson's words, which would help promote civic values, morals, and patriotism.<sup>16</sup> Yet men's adventure magazines alluded to problems with such conceptions. Apparently, all was not well at home. The November 1959 issue of *Cavalcade*, for example, ran a story on the "recent revolution in sex customs" that was causing a spike in extramarital relations. Changing mores – "largely in the matter of the woman's behavior" – implied that the traditional American family might be breaking down. Worse, it seemed, men were bearing the brunt of these changes. That same autumn, *Challenge* printed a story on the "millions of anxiety-ridden American men" who faced "serious mental illness" because they could not cope with numerous "upsetting sex problems." According to the article, these men were "deeply troubled because they feel sexually inadequate, abnormal or guilty."<sup>17</sup>

Not surprisingly, the macho pulps spoke little of the costs endured by women who were forced to subordinate their own desires to reinforce traditional values. Not all freely chose the postwar "retreat to housewifery." In the pulps, though, it was men who suffered as a result. As women increasingly controlled the domestic sphere, so a popular narrative went, they became an "idle class, a spending class, a candy-craving class."<sup>18</sup> In social critic Philip Wylie's eyes, men were spending most of their time supplying "whatever women have defined as their necessities, comforts, and luxuries." No wonder then, as the editors of *Look* magazine argued, women's new "economic and sexual demands" were "fatiguing American

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husbands.” Of course, where fears lurked, so too did opportunities exist. Thus, thumbing through adventure magazine ads, readers might remedy their ailments by sending in for a guide explaining “How to double your energy and live without fatigue.”<sup>19</sup>

Surely, not all men lived in panic during the 1950s, but the pulps did reflect widespread gender anxieties of the day. The domestic costs of containing communism at home, coupled with concerns about the dampening effect of women’s desires for affluence and security, suggested that suburban life might be corrupting real men. Certainly, popular novels like *Revolutionary Road* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* spoke to these anxieties, as did pulp articles like “Why Do We Have to Marry Women?”<sup>20</sup> Men’s adventure magazines thus might be seen as an outlet for the frustrations of living in a conformity-inducing society. If Betty Friedan correctly surmised that male outrage was the result of an “implacable hatred for the parasitic women who keep their husbands and sons from growing up,” then the macho pulps offered a wish fulfillment for those fantasizing about reaching their full potential as manly men.<sup>21</sup>

The corporatization of America further fanned male anxieties. Arthur Miller’s Willy Lohman and William Whyte’s “Organization Man” both illustrated the decline of individuality, if not spirit, in an era of consumer capitalism where mass corporations seemingly reigned supreme. Moreover, these works suggested that World War II veterans were having a difficult time reintegrating into a society that did not fully appreciate their sacrifices. In the 1956 film version of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Betsy Rath accosts her husband Tom for being more cautious since returning home from war: “You’ve lost your guts and all of a sudden I’m ashamed of you.”<sup>22</sup> Two years later, an *Esquire* essay by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. argued that men had retreated “into the womblike security of the group” and that mass democratic society itself constituted an “assault on individual identity.” “The frontiersmen of James Fenimore Cooper,” Schlesinger lamented, “never had any concern about masculinity; they were men, and it did not occur to them to think twice about it.”<sup>23</sup>

But how to maintain a sense of self-reliance when you were accepting government handouts? Take, for instance, the GI Bill which expanded access to education for an entire generation of American veterans yet clearly fell within the realm of social welfare expenditures. Some eight

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million World War II vets, just under fifty percent of the eligible population, received training benefits from the program. Roughly two million Korean War veterans did the same.<sup>24</sup> In addition, federal housing loans enabled young families, many for the first time, to purchase their own homes. Might it be that such welfare programs offering education and advancement came at a cost? Didn't white-collar jobs stimulate fears of feminization? Perhaps this is why the most common reason veterans cited for not using the GI Bill was that they "preferred work to school." Indeed, men's adventure magazines walked a fine line when it came to questions that were so intertwined with class conceptions. The pulps extolled the benefits of military service, and how it could promote social advancement, yet openly venerated working-class ideals and their value to proving one's manhood.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, it seems likely that many white, middle-aged men, bored or frustrated with their postwar lives, read men's magazines to regain a sense of what the periodicals were selling most – adventure. As historian Heather Marie Stur argues, the pulps "glorified the outdoorsman and the warrior as the antidote to stifling wives and domestic responsibilities."<sup>26</sup> According to *Stag*, the US Navy held "that exactly half the guys who volunteer for and go on Antarctic duty are there to escape women. If they're married, then Antarctica represents a cooling-off period." *Men* magazine went further. A July 1964 article, "A Young Legal Mistress for Every Man," asked readers if they were "plagued by a nagging wife" and if their jobs were driving them crazy. The "natural solution"? A *querida* who could serve as the "married male's last link with his romantic bachelor past." On the word of *Men*, the system worked so well that "even wives are for it."<sup>27</sup>

Despite these potential solutions, in numerous magazines – from *Cosmopolitan* to *Playboy* to *Man's Action* – it appeared as if wives were gaining the upper hand to "dominate" the American male. Modern mass society supposedly had feminized men. *Cosmopolitan* argued that "a boy growing up today has little chance to observe his father in strictly masculine pursuits." Writing for *Playboy* in 1958, critic Philip Wylie decried the "womanization of America," a "sad condition" in which women had secured dominance over men. The article's tagline left no doubt where Wylie stood: "an embattled male takes a look at what was once a man's world."<sup>28</sup>

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Adventure magazines went a step further: men weren't just being emasculated by the domestication process, they were being fully "castrated" by women in the home. *Sir!* offered a 1962 contribution titled "The Mental Castration of Husbands." Author Joe Pearson argued that "frustrated females" were waging "an all-out campaign against their mates." The goal, apparently, was to turn the man into a "converted housemaid." One year later, *Brigade* followed suit with "Castration of the American Male." A photograph of a sullen husband, in floral apron doing the dishes, accompanied the article. In it, Andrew Petersen claimed that the "manly virtues – strength, courage, virility – are becoming rarer every day... Femininity is on the march, rendering American men less manly." By mid 1966, the process of emasculation seemed complete as *Man's Action* asked if men's "sex guilts" were making them impotent.<sup>29</sup>

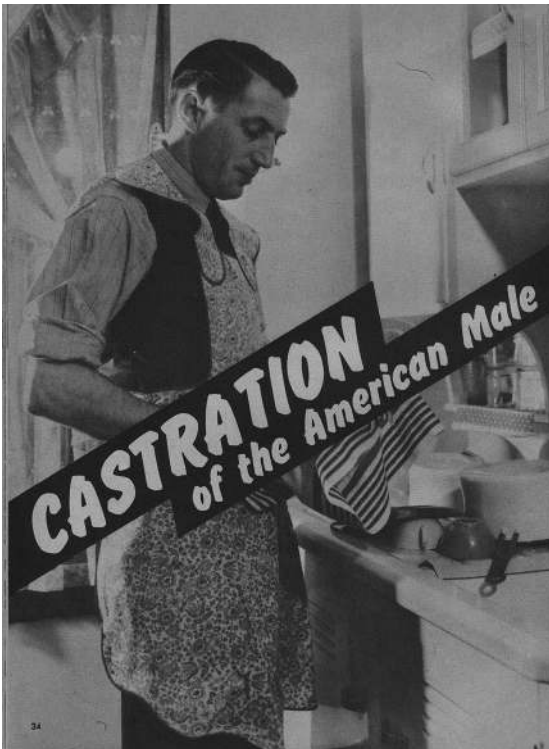


Fig. 1.1 *Brigade*, March 1963

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In an era of endless war against communism, concerns abounded that this emasculation of the American man might undermine military readiness. One periodical worried that if men were “denied a sphere of vigorous action,” they could lose their “chance of heroism.” The macho pulps, though, took the matter head on, especially in the immediate aftermath of the Korean War. Famed aviator Alexander P. de Seversky, writing for *Man’s Day* in 1953, pushed back against impressions that “American boys have suddenly become ‘afraid to fly.’” To Seversky, there was “nothing wrong with our young manhood.” Yet doubts persisted. In 1955, Senator Estes Kefauver (Democrat, Tennessee, a member of the Senate Armed Services committee) penned an essay for *Real Adventure* on the problems of American men being rejected for military service. Kefauver found that one of every ten men would be unqualified for service because they were “emotionally unfit or sexual deviants or unable to stand up mentally under the strain of army life and combat.” The problem had left the United States “shockingly, dangerously vulnerable,” so much so that the senator asked his young readers, “Are you the ninth man?”<sup>30</sup>

While fears of military unpreparedness reflected broader social anxieties, such concerns did not extend to matters of race in Cold War America. Men’s adventure magazines were written by and for white men. Rarely did African Americans appear in the pulps’ pages. Occasionally, men’s magazines would focus on contemporary racism, such as a 1952 *Stag* article highlighting a black World War II army air corps veteran who tried to move into a Chicago suburb.<sup>31</sup> A few pulp stories drew attention to the 1963 assassination of civil rights activist Medgar Evers, and *True* published an essay on “The Klansman.” But nowhere could readers listen to the stories of Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, or even Louis Armstrong.<sup>32</sup> Only in periodicals like *Ebony* and *Duke* could black men find similar treatments on masculinity and the challenges and opportunities of the Cold War consumer culture.<sup>33</sup>

Catering to a white male audience meant that men in minority groups – blacks, Latinos, Asian and Native Americans – were not recognized in the pulps as “real” or “full” men. This, despite the US armed forces becoming increasingly diverse in the 1950s and 1960s. Mexican American Raymond Buriel, for example, believed that if he and his peers



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“went into the military and served, nobody could question . . . our place here.”<sup>34</sup> Yet such aspirations seldom made it into the macho pulps. In large sense, adventure magazines not only deprived minority men of a place within the dominant narrative of masculinity enjoyed by fellow white soldiers – a kind of “sexual camaraderie” – but also implied that these men were not truly part of the heroic warrior–sexual conqueror paradigm. The “All-American” melting pot infantry squad, so popular in wartime movies, rarely saw action in pulp adventure stories.<sup>35</sup>

In other endeavors like sports – baseball and boxing, in particular – white Americans might allow some form of racial integration. Within the postwar pulps, blacks almost always were portrayed as athletes. Stories ran on boxers Jack Johnson, Floyd Patterson, and Sam Langford, “The Boston Tar Baby,” or on African American weightlifters like George Paine.<sup>36</sup> Racial fears and sexual anxieties, however, proscribed black men from being more. If their heroes were white, pulp writers could combine martial exploits with sexual conquest. An African American man, though, could never be linked to such sexual fantasies, especially those involving the taking of a white German *Fräulein*, a popular target of pulp heroes. White sexual champions, even predators, were acceptable, not black ones. In this vein, *American Manhood* published an article on venereal diseases and covered only syphilis and gonorrhea, because other STDs did “not occur too often among white people” and thus did not warrant discussion.<sup>37</sup>

Sporadic storylines did emerge of minority soldiers performing acts of heroism. *Stag* ran a few paragraphs on Private First Class Milton Olive, the first African American to earn the Medal of Honor in Vietnam, while *Male* featured Sioux Indian athlete and US marine lieutenant Billy Mills, who won a gold medal at the 1964 Olympics.<sup>38</sup> But in these stories, the hero never attained the sexual rewards reserved for his white compatriots. Or, in many cases, the recognition. As one civil rights leader, quoted in *Stag*’s piece on Olive, shared, “Men who have won our country’s greatest honor have become, in a sense, unknown soldiers.”<sup>39</sup>

Of course, men engrossed in these magazines may have been less apt to think about the state of racial inequality in 1950s America. Still, not all seemed right with the world. A host of Cold War anxieties – racial, gendered, social, domestic – intimated that working-class men were

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somehow not reaping the full rewards of a mass, consumer-based society. Despite the sense of a growing middle class, many Americans still felt they were being left behind, still confronted with the realities of social and economic inequality. Perhaps this explains why men's adventure magazines promised quick fixes to life's daily problems. One advertisement declared that you could "achieve more social and economic success" by developing a "stronger he-man voice." Here was your chance to "Be a 'Somebody,'" the ad proclaimed. An essay in *Real* assured readers that "Your Screwy Idea Can Make You a Million," the money-making brainstorm including whiskey-flavored toothpaste, do-it-yourself voodoo kits, and wax for "butch" haircuts.<sup>40</sup>

These strange ideas vowing profitable businesses, laughable in retrospect, illustrated genuine worries that men weren't measuring up in the aftermath of World War II. They also underscored the class component of men's adventure magazines. A sense of fiscal insecurity permeated ads and storylines of working-class men unable to take full advantage of the postwar consumer culture. One correspondence school advertisement, for instance, asked, "Are you expendable?" Another queried readers on whether they were "standing still" on their jobs. "Will recognition come?"<sup>41</sup> And as the nation inched closer to full-scale war in Vietnam, *Male* offered an exposé on why work pensions might not be "worth a red cent." So distressing were these economic hardships that *Saga* found it necessary to publish an article on men who, "working overtime, commuting to the suburbs, [and] taking care of a lawn," could no longer even afford a mistress.<sup>42</sup>

For pulp readers, though, an alternative to these frustrations existed. Adventure magazines promised untapped resources to achieve or regain one's masculinity. Pay raises, promotions, women, heroism, and success in life all lay within reach. Or so the pulps implied.

#### SELLING A NEW AMERICAN MAN

Despite magazines' promises of advancement and security, working-class anxieties never seemed to subside during the years leading up to America's war in Vietnam. While the nation's gross national product grew by over \$200 billion between 1950 and 1960, many male workers felt