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Performing Toxic Masculinity During the January 6th Insurrection

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Abstract

This article examines the events of the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol through the theoretical lens of toxic masculinity. While toxic masculinity was not the sole cause of the attack, it does explain many of the day's events, including the large percentage of men in the mob, their militaristic dress and demeanor, and the targeting of constitutional officers. Moreover, the author argues that the concepts of democracy, liberty, and the peaceful transfer of power are gendered female, further explaining the violence fueled by the myths behind toxic masculinity.

Keywords: toxic masculinity, U.S. Capitol insurrection, democracy

The images from the U.S. Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021, are compelling and burned into Americans' collective memories. Richard Barnett puts his feet on a desk in Nancy Pelosi's office (Bella, 2021). Doug Jensen, sporting a QAnon t-shirt, yells at a police officer (Hsu, 2021). Shirtless and tattooed, Jacob Chansley sports patriotic face paint and a fur cap with horns (Cohen, 2021). Kevin Seefried carries a Confederate battle flag through the Capitol (Higgins, 2021). Josiah Colt hangs by one hand from the Senate balcony wearing a gas mask and helmet (Williams, 2021). As of February 2022, more than 750 individuals have been charged in connection with the insurrection (National Public Radio, 2022)

As Judith Butler (1988) expressed three decades ago, gender is performative. Social norms demand that individuals act in certain ways based upon their biological sex. In the preceding cases, the men not only performed their gender roles, but also enacted a particularly dangerous and violent form of masculinity: toxic masculinity. This article explores how toxic masculinity can be used to understand and interpret the actions of those who attacked the Capitol during the January 6th insurrection.

What Is Toxic Masculinity?

Michael Kimmel, a well-known scholar of masculinity, recognized that masculinity takes many forms, some of which are benign and even beneficial. In his work, Kimmel documented the emergence of the model, or storyline, of the self-made man. In this masculinity narrative, cis-gendered, White men achieve material success and personal happiness through their entrepreneurial drive and economic success. They meet their obligations to their families by being the breadwinner. In return, their wives and children recognize the man's unchallenged authority in the home (e.g., Kimmel & Wade, 2018).

According to Kimmel and Wade (2018), toxic masculinity arises when this storyline falls apart. The researchers described an asymmetry in feminist critiques of male privilege:

Feminism basically offered women a symmetry between the social and the individual. The social observation was women as a group are not in power. And individually, women did not feel powerful. So feminism basically said, let's address both of those: the individual powerlessness and the social powerlessness. When you apply that same syllogism to men, men *are* in power, everyone agrees, but when you say therefore men must feel powerful, they look at you cross-eyed. They say, "What are you talking about? I have no power. My wife bosses me around. My kids boss me around. My boss bosses me around." (p. 236)

This asymmetry is particularly profound for White, working-class men, many of whom were raised to be the dominant minority in American society. Yet, as the United States moved to a knowledge and service economy and well-paying industrial jobs disappeared, working-class men were unable to provide for their families as their fathers had. At the same time, women's rights, civil rights, and LGBTQ+ movements gained traction. Men are socialized to expect they will succeed financially, politically, and socially; when they do not, they become resentful and look for scapegoats. Social movements seeking to empower historically marginalized communities—racial and ethnic minorities, women, immigrants—become convenient targets. These groups appear to be achieving the respect and upward mobility that seems to elude them as working-class White men.

According to Carol Harrington (2021), Shepherd Bliss coined the term *toxic masculinity* “to characterize his father’s militarized, authoritarian masculinity” (p. 348). In its most extreme form, toxic masculinity disdains any displays of emotion as weak and effeminate, objectifies women and treats them as inferiors, and advocates violence to resolve conflict. Toxic masculinity is also characterized by misogyny and violence against women (Harrington, 2021). In addition, toxic masculinity has been used to explain political extremism (Pearson, 2019), mass shootings (Marcotte, 2018; Scott-Coe 2020), the misogynistic “incel” (involuntarily celibate) movement (Haenfler 2020), domestic violence (Scott-Coe, 2020), sexual assault (Kimmel & Wade, 2018), and misogyny in the gaming community (Gray et al., 2017). In 2018, the Southern Poverty Law Center classified two male supremacy groups—A Voice for Men and Return of the Kings—as hate groups and began tracking their activities, noting that male supremacy groups are a “gateway” to alt-right white supremacy organizations (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018; see also Johnson, 2019).

Former President Donald Trump’s personal narrative fits the prototype of Kimmel’s masculine storyline (Kimmel & Wade, 2018)—even if the truth includes some inconsistencies. As Trump tells it, he is a cis-gendered, self-made man who achieved wealth through his business success. He dominates all who work for him, enjoys the loyalty of his adult children, and is accompanied by his beautiful young wife who rarely speaks her mind or speaks at all.

In addition, the masculine narrative was enhanced by Trump’s behavior in the 2016 presidential campaign, when he belittled opponents; attacked female candidates Hillary Clinton and Carly Fiorina, and the reporter Megan Kelly, using sexist language; and was caught bragging about sexual assault. His campaign rhetoric was full of hyper-masculine language, especially his promises to be “tough” on crime and on the United States’ international rivals (e.g., Boatright & Sperling, 2020; Finley & Johnson, 2018; Harp, 2019). Moreover, Trump displayed his toxic masculinity without serious consequence. Not only did he win the Electoral College vote in 2016, but in both 2016 and 2020, Trump received a majority of votes cast by men of all races (52% in 2016 and 51% in 2020) and a supermajority of votes cast by White men (61%; Center for American Women and Politics, 2020). Similarly, White college graduates favor the Democratic Party (53%), while those with some or no college experience favor the Republican Party (58%; Pew Research Center, 2018).

Gender and American Ideals

While English nouns are not gendered like those in German or romance languages, in many respects, the United States is gendered female. For instance, many of the statues that represent the nation are allegorical females, including the Statue of Liberty, the Statue of Freedom atop the Capitol building, and Justice, who is blindfolded and holds scales (see Fox, 2021; McIntire, 2011). According to historian Sara Day (2001), between 1500 and 1800, the New World—and later the United States—was depicted as female, at times Indigenous and at times European. Before “Uncle Sam” became popular culture’s depiction of the United States, the country was represented by “Columbia,” another metaphorical female (Franke-Ruta, 2013; Women at the Center, 2018).

While the New World and the embodiment of its ideals of liberty and justice may be feminine, Jane Mansbridge (2000) noted that political theorists have defined democratic processes in masculine terms. The dominant frame was one of self-interested actors working to achieve their personal goals. Deliberation is a zero-sum game in which one person or faction

wins (i.e., over a competitor). Rather, Mansbridge argued that feminism and its emphasis on “win-win” scenarios, altruism, and common good is another means of understanding deliberation and democratic processes. Thus, by extension, compromise, the rule of law, and respect for the will of the voters, even if one does not agree with the majority, are also gendered feminine, especially since they contribute to peaceful governance.

Moreover, Laura Van Berkel and her colleagues (2017) found that men and women alike saw masculinity as a more “American” or patriotic trait than femininity and that men were more likely to be identified as examples of “Americans.” In addition, the more that men identified with their gender, the more they identified themselves as Americans or patriots. Building upon this work, Deckman and Cassese (2019) reported that 45% of American voters agreed that American society is “too soft and feminine” (p. 285). This opinion was correlated with identification with the Republican Party, being male, and lacking a college degree. Fully 80% of Republican men without college degrees agreed that the United States is too soft and feminine, compared to 57% of Republican women, irrespective of their educational attainment.

Toxic Masculinity and the January 6th Insurrection

The January 6th insurrection was an expression of toxic masculinity in several ways. First, the democratic ritual of counting Electoral College votes is a masculine, zero-sum game, since it is based upon majoritarian principles and (usually) results in the declaration of one winner and at least one loser. However, it is also the ritual that results in the peaceful transfer of power between political factions. Peace—the opposite of masculine warfare—is often gendered feminine, with the proliferation of women’s peace organizations as a case in point.

Second, the Capitol building not only is adorned with symbols of American democracy but is itself a symbol of it. Moreover, a democratic ritual, the peaceful transfer of power between political factions, was underway on January 6th. If democracy and peace are seen as “soft” or “feminine,” then toxic masculinity would demand obedience as it demands obedience from women. Thus, as long as democratic traditions yield the desired result, they are not challenged; otherwise, toxic masculinity advocates using violence to achieve one’s ends. Ironically, the January 6th insurrectionists considered themselves patriots. However, arguably, their patriotic fervor was more inspired by President Trump’s authoritarian proclivities and the myth of American dominance and exceptionalism than its (feminine) democratic ideals.

Third, many of the insurrectionists were dressed in pseudo military or law enforcement gear, and others sported clothing that glorified Trump or the debunked conspiracy theorist “Q.” Not only does attire denote group membership, but military and police uniforms are the literal physical embodiment of the state and the power of its weaponry (Kedrowski et al., 2021). Moreover, the mob used items, like flag poles, as weapons and to break into the building. The “Trump 2020” flags denoted group membership and loyalty to their leader. The U.S. flags symbolized their purported patriotism, apparently without irony; and the Confederate flag carried by Seefried has been widely adopted by white supremacist groups.

Fourth, the insurrectionists sought out and threatened Speaker Nancy Pelosi as she was carrying out her constitutional responsibilities. The ire directed at Pelosi was particularly intense. Her staff barricaded themselves in a conference room to escape the mob. The office was ransacked, a laptop was stolen, protesters left threatening messages, and Mr. Barnett was photographed with his feet on a desk. Speaker Pelosi is a female, a liberal, and a feminist. She is the physical embodiment of what toxic masculinity despises most: She is a woman who

unapologetically holds a position of power and authority over other men. Moreover, she is the only woman to serve as Speaker, making her open to the charge that she “took” the position from a deserving male, and she openly exercises her powers of office. Pelosi stood up to their hero, President Trump (Ball, 2020; Page, 2021) on several well-publicized occasions. For all these reasons, Pelosi became a *bête noir* to the far right and received death threats during the insurrection (Gardiner, 2021).

Sixth, men raised within the toxic masculinity paradigm too often avoid punishment for their misdeeds. The oft-repeated phrase “boys will be boys” excuses the excesses of males’ behavior and shields them from consequences. So, too, with the January 6th insurrectionists, many of whom see themselves as victims within the criminal justice system and have expressed dismay that they are facing consequences for their actions. According to Dan Zak and Karen Heller (2021), who analyzed legal documents submitted by the defendants’ attorneys, “Lawyers blame Donald Trump, the media, naïveté, trauma, unemployment, the pandemic, Washington elites, their clients’ childhoods, and the singular nature of the event itself... The mob mentality made them do it.” Others have expressed outrage at their treatment by the criminal justice system. Richard Barnett claimed that “it’s not fair” that he was still in custody while others had been released. As quoted by Zak and Heller, “QAnon Shaman” Jacob Chesney’s attorney stated that Chesney “struggles to cling on to and salvage his mental health”—“as if the Capitol breach was something that happened to Chesney, and not the other way around,” the authors concluded.

Finally, even some anomalies lend credence to my thesis that the January 6th insurrection was an exercise in toxic masculinity. One is the unusually large percentage of women who have been arrested for their roles in the insurrection. As of January 2022, 13% of the individuals arrested were women, more than doubling the percentage of women who typically participate in violent extremist groups (Miller-Idriss, 2022). Some of these women were leaders in the QAnon movement and at least two, Ashli Babbitt and Jessica Watkins, were military veterans (Anti-Defamation League, 2021). While the notion of toxic masculinity is usually used to analyze men’s behaviors, women can adopt the same values. For instance, women too may believe that they—or their male partners—have been displaced by less deserving groups. They too may espouse violence to resolve conflict and see masculinity as more patriotic than femininity. In fact, joining the military, storming the Capitol, or demonizing others is a means of “performing” masculinity in the Butlerian tradition and of assuming some of the power usually reserved for White men.

At first blush, the death threats against then-Vice President Mike Pence also appear anomalous. After all, Pence is a conservative White male. Yet, Pence was a soft-spoken and loyal vice president, and during his 4 years in office, he did not upstage his flamboyant boss and readily defended administration policies. Pence values his marriage and “never dines alone with a woman other than [his wife] Karen,” whom he refers to as “Mother” (Kruzel, 2018). Indeed, Pence appears to be an example of healthy masculinity.

Ultimately, Pence maintained that he did not have the authority to overturn the Electoral College vote, despite an intense lobbying campaign by then-President Trump and his allies. This stance led Trump to respond in a typically toxic way. He repeatedly criticized Pence for lacking “courage” (Helderman & Dawsey, 2021). By implication, then, Pence was cowardly and weak—two characteristics that are unacceptable to those who embrace toxic masculinity. Trump’s public condemnations of Pence further inflamed the crowd and led them to seek out Pence

during the insurrection. Thus, the crowd's targeting of Vice President Pence is not anomalous at all.

Conclusion

Arguably, the roots of toxic masculinity run deep and extend to the violence of the earliest days of the Republic—with the violence of slavery, the violent displacement of Indigenous peoples, and the complete subjugation of European women. The problem was exacerbated by the rise of the various civil rights movements that sought to end discrimination against women, people of color, and LGBTQ persons. All these groups, and any successes they might have achieved, appeared to displace the working-class White male from his economic success and his position of power in the family.

The seeds of this problem were fertilized in the 1980s, when the Reagan Administration rescinded the Fairness Doctrine, thereby allowing for the rise of conservative talk radio and cable news networks with a decided ideological bent. Scholars decried the tendency of people to stay in partisan “echo chambers.” Social media only accelerated these trends and led to the proliferation of conspiracy theories and blatant falsehoods. Yet, toxic masculinity helps explain the *response* of the insurrectionists who mobbed the Capitol on January 6th. Toxic masculinity explains not only violence against women, misogyny, and authoritarianism, but also violence against democracy herself.

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