

Mother-Blaming and the Rise of the Expert

By Ashley Marie Aidenbaum

During times of national uncertainty, concerned citizens often turn to experts for guidance and to restore stability. The challenges of military training and horrors of World War II put notions of American manliness to the test—and assumptions of natural male toughness collapsed under the circumstances. Although the broader American domestic crisis during World War II and early years of the Cold War stemmed from deeply rooted societal and political limitations, many citizens understood domestic unrest as a personal or even pathological problem and sought expert guidance. Rather than examining the problematic nature of mutually exclusive gender distinctions, experts inverted the crisis and blamed mothers for masculine failure. The legacy of expert mother-blaming lies in their assumption that the nation could not fail—only exceptional, bad citizens within it. From this it followed that American manhood contained no conceptual flaws; only exceptional flaws in practice due to bad mothers.

World War II destabilized American family life and prompted difficult transitions for returning soldiers and their families. The professionals they turned to produced writings that both reflected and propagated anxiety about masculinity, femininity, and domestic life on whole. This reliance on experts points to a broader historical trend: a “therapeutic ethos” in which Americans have sought private, individual solutions to public, national problems. In this context, the practice of blaming mothers for societal issues thrived in new forms from the early 1940s to the early 1960s and served as a means of containing female power in work and domestic spheres. This essay will examine the origins of mother-blaming with Philip Wylie’s Generation of Vipers in 1942, follow its multi-decade diffusion into expert literature, popular culture and film, and consider the historical context in which these various incarnations emerged. Additionally, it will

illuminate the way Betty Friedan's Feminine Mystique disrupted this practice in 1963 while still in the framework of the "therapeutic ethos".

The political link between motherhood and the nation is firmly rooted in American cultural tradition. As early as the eighteenth century, Americans celebrated and practiced "Republican Motherhood" as a feminine ideal and expression of patriotism. Through this model, "Republican mothers" supposedly acquired the indirect political responsibility of rearing their sons to be virtuous citizens of the Republic. This model has since persisted in myriad forms throughout American history, such as domestic ideology in the 1950s.¹ When the nation encountered adversity during World War II, experts tapped into the modern form of this Republican ideal and blamed mothers for a broad range of societal problems.

Two conditions of World War II catalyzed concerns about masculinity and femininity: inadequate male soldiers and able female workers. Both of these developments challenged gender norms and propelled anxiety about male "softness" and female toughness. Apprehension regarding masculine failure in the war contributed to the expansion of expertise, ultimately facilitating a mother-blaming trend throughout the postwar and Cold War era in the United States. Newspapers and magazines from this period addressed these concerns and attest to the instability that emerged as a result of wartime conditions.

Instances of men who dodged the draft or who somehow failed to perform adequately as soldiers deflated the notion of natural or inherent male toughness. Military personnel and civilians alike became alarmed at frequently reported facts regarding such failures. Reportedly, 1,825,000 men were rejected from military service due to psychiatric disorders, nearly 600,000 were discharged from the Army for neuropsychiatric or related problems, and 500,000 additional men attempted draft evasion. Time magazine described the crisis from a military officer's

¹ Lassiter, Matt. "The Domestic Crisis." History of American Suburbia. [University of Michigan](#) 28 September 2006.

perspective: “Four-fifths of those discharged had cracked up under training-camp discipline before they saw any fighting. General Cooke found many a plain and fancy coward.”² Such degradation of American manliness left many in search of an explanation. This inquiry led ultimately to a close examination of childhood experience and the impact of mothers on sons as future soldiers.

Motherhood and the proper “role” or “place” for females was of primary concern during and after wartime. The need for factory workers while men were at war increased female entry into the public work sphere. The departure of enlisted men for war disrupted family life and left many women to fill their jobs. Experts expressed concerns about familial disruption and female employment, but “Rosie the Riveter” demonstrated her suitability for jobs outside of domestic life in the face of skepticism. In her book Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era, Elaine Tyler May argues that the “independence of wartime women” gave rise to fears of female sexuality and capability.³ Anxiety about female dominance eventually found expression in an emergent expert ideology that dominant, overbearing mothers were a societal menace.

The rigid expectations that once defined masculinity and femininity in American life proved unsustainable in the conditions of the war. In response to the instability, cultural and political works of the time attempted to sustain some semblance of traditional feminine delicateness and subordination. For example, magazines advised working women to navigate their new roles in careful, discreet ways. In 1942, Good Housekeeping published “How a Woman Should Wear a Uniform,” a prescriptive article on how to maintain “the quiet air of a woman” while in work attire. It included such instructions as:

² “Mama’s Boys” Time 25 November 1946. 18 December 2006 <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,852961,00.html>>.

³ May, Elaine Tyler. Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era. New York: Basic Books, 1988. 59.

Don't cut your hair very short. A mannish effect is the last thing you want.
Don't swagger or stride along in masculine fashion.
Don't assume a self-righteous air, as if you were doing more for your country than other women are.
Don't wear a uniform unless it has real significance and you are fully qualified to wear it.⁴

As reflected in this example, the didactic articles of wartime advised women to fill “manly” jobs, but in a “womanly” manner.



The army poster pictured on the left holds the caption “WOMAN’S PLACE IN WAR” and features a woman in uniform, working at the sewing machine in a tranquil setting. Posters frequently featured women in uniform, but never postured in a dominant stance. They are not pictured with weapons or other seemingly masculine objects.

As female visibility in the public sphere increased during wartime, political figures took a clear interest in private matters of home and family. Although the wartime economy relied on female employment, politicians frequently insisted that women should never work at the expense of their sacred duty as mothers. J. Edgar Hoover, then director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, declared in one women’s magazine, “The mother of small children does not need to put on overalls to prove her patriotism. She already has her war job... *There must be no absenteeism among mothers.*”⁵ James M. Wood, president of Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri cautioned against female abandonment of familial duties:

⁴ “How a Woman Should Wear a Uniform”. *Good Housekeeping*. August 1942. *Rpt. in* Walker, Nancy A., ed. *Women’s Magazines 1940-1960: Gender Roles and the Popular Press*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1998. 36.

⁵ Hoover, Edgar J. “Mothers...Our Only Hope.” *Woman’s Home Companion*. 20 January 1944. *Rpt. in* Walker, Nancy A., ed. *Women’s Magazines 1940-1960: Gender Roles and the Popular Press*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1998. 46.

“Mothers are still being lured from their homes with pay checks, are still being told their patriotic duty lies in the factory... Her patriotic duty is not on the factory front. It is on the *home* front!”⁶ Furthermore, popular literature emphasized female employment as a temporary condition—an exception to their proper, natural role—and constantly reminded women to relinquish their jobs once the soldiers returned.⁷

If manliness equaled toughness and femininity equaled delicateness, men who were unable or unwilling to fight and women who were able and willing to work in factories required some special explanation. These two circumstances—the military’s failure to produce adequate soldiers, and increased female presence in the workplace—magnified societal anxieties about gender and family dynamics in general. The widely held belief that motherhood and male military service were imperative to national security resulted in a sizeable public response to instabilities in these traditional institutions.

In the face of national crisis, concerned Americans turned to experts to restore and scientifically inculcate traditional gender roles. This regard for professionals as authorities was part of a broader social phenomenon, facilitated by a Cold War political context that heavily relied on science and expertise. Scientists crafted and engineered the Cold War on multiple levels: “Physicists developed the bomb, strategists created the cold war, and scientific managers built the military-industrial complex.”⁸ Citizens resorted to experts on matters of safety. Magazines like Look told readers not to worry about understanding the dangers of radioactivity; if circumstances did some day necessitate it, “the experts will be ready to tell you.”⁹ Thus,

⁶ Wood, James M. “Should We Draft Mothers?” Woman’s Home Companion. 21 January 1944. *Rpt. in* Walker, Nancy A., ed. Women’s Magazines 1940-1960: Gender Roles and the Popular Press. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1998. 50.

⁷ May. Homeward Bound. 64-65.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

America's use for science in the Cold War seemed to elevate experts to a hero-like status. In Homeward Bound, May calls this phenomenon the "the era of the expert."

In 1949, historian Arthur Schlesinger characterized the Cold War as the "age of anxiety".¹⁰ Anxiety and expertise in this time required one another; people looked to professionals for advice about war, safety, but also about how to manage their personal life. This public discourse between uneasy citizens and experts constantly reinforced and promoted the importance of avoiding divergences from "normal" behavior. Americans referred to specialists more than ever before. A study of over 4,000 Americans demonstrated that reliance on expertise was one of the most salient trends in the postwar era.¹¹ Although the 'cult of expertise' did not surface suddenly, Americans' needs in the postwar moment allowed it to expand rapidly.

Two very different figures emerged in this context of gender panic, each espousing their own views on motherhood. These experts embody a crude dichotomy: Philip Wylie, author of Generation of Vipers, presented a mother-blaming argument regarding societal problems, while Dr. Benjamin Spock, most famous for his book Baby and Child Care, represented a mother-worshipping response. Still, Spock and Wylie both emphasized the importance of motherhood, and both were men who issued instructional literature about how women ought to conduct themselves with their children. As Ruth Rosen notes in The World Split Open, the coexistence of these two writers in the postwar period gave American mothers the sense that they walked a fine line: "If they worked outside their homes, they risked creating a generation of juvenile delinquents. If they stayed at home and smothered their children, they risked producing a generation of denatured, sissified young men".¹² In this way, each of these male experts informed and propagated the same belief in the centrality of motherhood to democratic stability

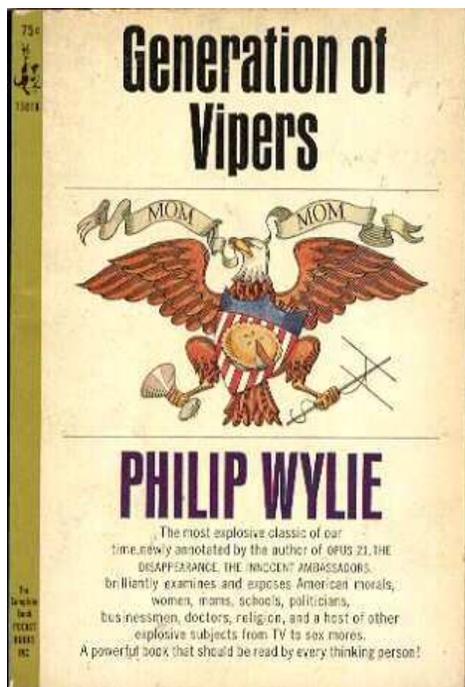
¹⁰ Schlesinger, Arthur. The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949.

¹¹ May. Homeward Bound. 21.

¹² Rosen, Ruth. The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America. New York: Penguin Books, 2000. 15.

of American life; the notion that women constantly teetered between aiming for the perfection that Spock advised and descending into the demonic neuroticism against which Wylie cautioned.

Wylie coined the term “momism” in 1942 in his best-selling book Generation of Vipers. According to this passionate diatribe, “momism” was a social ailment resulting from frustrated



women who channeled their sexual suppression into overbearing, overly affectionate motherhood. Wylie made a distinction between mothers and “moms”; mothers enacted the celebrated ideal and remained virtuous and true to the Republic, and moms, “the thundering third sex,” threatened the nation by raising unmanly sons unfit for battle.¹³ He argued “mother-worship” had brought America to the verge of social disaster, “It is time for man to make a new appraisal of himself... The United States of America is still intact, but

its material safety is by no means guaranteed and its psychological future is in black doubt.”¹⁴

Wylie portrayed bad mothers—“moms”—as an internal enemy to the United States, “Our society is too much an institution built on the rapacity of loving mothers... it is the moms who have made this war.”¹⁵ The “mealy look of men today,” he claimed, was the result of momism.¹⁶ Wylie even likened “moms” to Adolph Hitler, and said “A new slave population continually goes to work at making more munitions for momism, and mom herself sticks up her head... to find some new region that needs taking over.”¹⁷ He also accused mothers of controlling the

¹³ Wylie, Philip. Generation of Vipers: Newly Annotated by the Author. 1942. New York: Rinehart, 1955. 204.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 216.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 210.

¹⁷ Wylie. Generation of Vipers. 206.

economy and using the war for their own agenda.¹⁸ His language exploited paranoia about communism, fascism and treason, and sexual deviance.

Wylie's claims, although partially based on the reputable psychological insights of Sigmund Freud, lacked apparent substantiation by scientific method. In a later edition of the book, he included an introduction expressing a hope that the "learning of science, logic, reason and especially the logics of dynamic psychology" could prevent the downfall of a great nation.¹⁹ He employed a pseudo-Freudian analysis to explain men who seemed emasculated, and called for an undoing of 'smother-love':

'Her boy', having been 'protected' by her love, and carefully, even shudderingly, shielded from his logical development... is cushioned against any major step in his progress toward maturity. Mom steals from the generation of women behind her (which she has, as still a further defense, also sterilized of integrity and courage) that part of her boy's personality which should have become the love of a female contemporary.²⁰

To Wylie, moms who smothered their sons reared unfit soldiers, and in war "what he has permitted her to do to him has rendered him unworthy of consideration."²¹ Only in this special context of war and crisis could Wylie so successfully locate an audience for such a polemic.²²

Wylie's book elicited a wide variety of responses. Periodical material concerning Generation of Vipers frequently acknowledged the contentious nature of Wylie's thesis. An advertisement in the New York Times read: "This book has been greeted by everything but indifference."²³ Reviews certainly echo this claim. The Los Angeles Times featured a three-page article on Wylie, "The Man Who Hates 'Mom'." The author notes:

His most celebrated attack was on that most sacrosanct of figures, the American Mother. During the war, when almost everyone was glorifying her, Wylie turned on her

¹⁸ Feldstein, Ruth. Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000. 41.

¹⁹ Wylie, Philip. Introduction. Generation of Vipers: Newly Annotated by the Author. 1942. New York: Rinehart, 1955. xviii.

²⁰ Wylie. Generation of Vipers. 208

²¹ *Ibid.* 205.

²² Rogin, Michael. "Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies." Representations (1984): 7.

²³ Generation of Vipers by Philip Wylie. Advertisement. New York Times. 21 February 1943. BR23.

savagely... It is worth noting that although he got plenty of squawks from the moms, he got few from sons and husbands.²⁴

The Christian Science Monitor critiqued Wylie's articulation of "the American male's still-too-frequent suspicion of the woman who 'thinks'."²⁵ One psychoanalyst praised his writing, arguing that it performed a "necessary and mentally hygienic function."²⁶ Another enthusiastic reviewer said it should be "compulsory reading" in every institution.²⁷ Regardless of whether Americans endorsed or rejected Wylie's perspective, Generation of Vipers generated a lengthy debate about mothers and sons that stimulated both common and "expert" discussion.

The popularity of Spock's bestselling Baby and Child Care attests to a widespread faith invested in expertise. Spock stressed that mothers should devote constant attention and love to their babies, and provides detailed instructions for how to do so. Rima Apple notes the social meaning of his book in Perfect Motherhood: "The 'Spock Generation': a familiar motto in postwar United States and into the Cold War... Spock's name became shorthand in the popular media for modern child-care advice—the mid-twentieth-century version of scientific motherhood."²⁸ Spock begins his book with the sentence, "You know more than you think you do," but the 596 pages of comprehensive instructions that follow suggest that instinct and love is insufficient without the detailed advice of a pediatrician. In 1946, the New York Times featured a glowing review of the book, "Dr. Spock interprets the best in modern thinking on these subjects, underscores it with his own wide experience, kindness and good sense."²⁹ The review included the following observation: "Sociologists might read this book for its reflection of parent anxieties in our contemporary culture. In his practice, as a consultant and pediatrician, Dr.

²⁴ Miller, James R. "The Man-Who Hates 'Mom'." Los Angeles Times. 30 March 1947. F4.

²⁵ "Old War: New Skirmish." Christian Science Monitor. 11 December 1947. 26.

²⁶ Generation of Vipers by Philip Wylie. Advertisement. New York Times. 13 November 1949. BR44.

²⁷ Generation of Vipers by Philip Wylie. Advertisement. New York Times. 21 February 1943. BR23.

²⁸ Apple, Rima. Perfect Motherhood: Science and Childrearing in America. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006. 107.

²⁹ Mackenzie, Catherine. "First-Aid to Parents." New York Times. 14 July 1946. 113.

Spock seems to have been on the receiving end of them all.”³⁰ In this regard, the popularity of his book reflected not only faith but also reliance on professional guidance. In a section on “cooperating with other child specialists,” Spock called for a whole network of experts in some cases,

The teacher should even be able to get in touch with the child’s scoutmaster, minister, doctor, and vice versa... When there is no guidance counselor or psychologist, or when the teacher finds that the problem is deep-rooted, it is wise to turn to a private children’s psychiatrist or to a guidance clinic, if such is available.³¹

A close reading of passages like these suggest a mixed message; Spock told parents to trust themselves, yet at the same time he reminded them to confer with guidance counselors and psychiatrists.

Although the majority of the book consists of directions for physical and emotional childcare, at times it seems as though his book argues for its own importance. Spock noted the expanding role of mental health professionals, “Back in the nineteenth century, psychiatrists were mainly concerned with taking care of the insane... But as psychiatrists have learned how serious troubles usually develop out of mild ones, they have turned more and more attention to everyday problems.”³² Indeed, long-term private therapy reached an unprecedented popularity in the 1950s, suggesting a change in perceptions of mental health services from a narrow use for insane persons to a broader use for average Americans to manage daily life and personal concerns.³³

During this time, American culture largely subscribed to scientific motherhood by Spock’s design.³⁴ Time said of Spock:

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Spock, Benjamin. *Dr. Spock’s Baby and Child Care*. 1946. New York: Dutton, 1998. 402-403.

³² *Ibid.* 411.

³³ May. *Homeward Bound*. 21.

³⁴ Apple. *Perfect Motherhood*. 108.

R. BENJAMIN SPOCK is not a public figure, but he has more leverage on tomorrow than many men who are. In six years his 35¢ Pocket Book on baby care has sold more than 4,000,000 copies, which puts it in a class with the dictionary and the Bible. Millions of mothers regard him as an oracle, parents turn out 5,000 strong to hear him lecture, and other pediatricians joke that their main job is to interpret him.³⁵

As Time suggests, Spock's message resonated beyond the scope of mothers. Although he may not have been a full-fledged "public figure," his work and its permeation into popular discourse carried heavy political implications. Spock promoted democratic methods for rearing psychologically fit citizens through carefully calculated childrearing: "Democracy builds discipline... This training, this spirit, is what makes the best citizens, the most valuable workers, and even the finest soldiers."³⁶ Through psychological language, Spock echoed the sentiment that good mothers were a "precondition to healthy citizens and a strong democracy."³⁷

Politicians validated Spock's modernized 'Republican motherhood' notion of a political bond between mothers and sons, and his position that mothers were important to the strength of the nation and responsible for the outcome of the next generation. In 1950, Spock addressed the delegates at the White House Conference on Children and Youth. President Truman's attendance at the conference attested to the political significance of the status of the next generation. One article observed:

Not even the presence of British Prime Minister... for emergency conferences on the Korean and world crisis prevented President Truman from keeping a speaking date which he considered of the utmost importance, and one directly bearing on the day's vital problems.³⁸

In his speech, President Truman further pronounced the link between youth and democracy in the context of the Cold War, "The President called upon American educators, parents, religious leaders, and social workers to help strengthen the nation's youth [against the] mental and

³⁵ "Personality." Time. 21 July 1952. 19 December 2006 <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,859880,00.html>>.

³⁶ Feldstein. Motherhood in Black and White. 44, 62-63.; Spock. Baby and Child Care. 402.

³⁷ Feldstein. Motherhood in Black and White. 2.

³⁸ Ripley, Josephine. "Truman Speech Packs Dramatic Punch." Christian Science Monitor. 5 December 1950. 5.

physical aggressiveness of communism.”³⁹ Thus, Truman and Spock both envisioned an important link between childrearing and democracy.

In this era of the expert, necessitated by anxieties about gender and nation-strength, Americans came to see mothers as responsible not only for the physical and educational well-being of their children but also for psychological well-being. In Motherhood in Black and White, Ruth Feldstein notes this extension of motherly duties and its political significance:

After World War II, psychological and political analysis increasingly overlapped. Categories like repression, neurosis, paranoia, insecurity, and frustration became vehicles for analyzing both personal and political problems, and for determining who and what was a healthy American citizen.⁴⁰

The belief in the importance of motherhood to children and the nation as a whole set the stage for both the idealization and condemnation of mothers during this time of crisis for democracy and domestic life. The connection between childrearing and citizenship enabled mother-blaming as a public, political phenomenon rather than just a private discussion among elite “experts.”

Expert discussion of motherhood in the postwar period embodied strong, opposing views of mothers. Americans invested in experts like Spock celebrated and placed great importance on motherhood; but when mothers were neglectful or overbearing, they could become “the decade’s villains” as described in Wylie’s formulation.⁴¹ Society, in essence, created a monster by oversentimentalizing motherhood and idealizing 19th century domestic ideology. In “Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies,” Michael Rogin’s analysis supports this explanation: “Domestic ideology... was double-edged in its impact on both family privacy and female power... Domestic ideology justified women’s confinement in the home by making mothers into the guardians of public morality.”⁴² In this model, women traded their economic

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Feldstein. Motherhood in Black and White. 6.

⁴¹ May. Homeward Bound. 64.

⁴² Rogin. “Kiss Me Deadly.” 5.

and political agency for moral empowerment as mothers. As Feldstein suggests, “Praise for mothers and criticism of them insisted on the centrality of women to the private sphere and on the centrality of the private sphere as a source of psychological health.”⁴³ Thus, even the idealization of motherhood did more to contain women than to elevate their political or social status.

The idealization and condemnation of mothers is best understood as two different phenomena emerging from the same cultural practices: emphasis on the importance of mothers, and reliance on experts to regulate and inform the institution of motherhood. Momism, Rogin argues, is the “demonic version” of the domestic ideology.⁴⁴ Because the ‘Republican motherhood’ model emphasized feminine power through motherhood, under the special conditions of the era, Americans and their trusted experts came to fear that power and to blame women for masculine crisis. The aforementioned observations of scholars like Rogin and Feldstein reinforce the presence of this dialectic of mother-praising and mother-blaming, and the necessary interconnectedness between the two.

Wylie’s Generation of Vipers was an immediate best seller, and other writings shortly surfaced espousing the same ideology of condemnation towards mothers. Dr. Edward Strecker introduced his highly political version of momism at a medical convention in New York City in 1945. The New York Times reported his lecture in the article “‘Moms’ Denounced as Peril to Nation.” Strecker titled his speech “Psychiatry Speaks to Democracy,” and in it he explained that many men were unfit to fight in the war due to apron-stringing “Moms” who ruined them emotionally.⁴⁵ The following year, he published his book Their Mothers’ Sons. In the foreword to his book, Eugene Meyer, then Chairman of the National Committee on Mental Hygiene said

⁴³ Feldstein, Ruth. Motherhood in Black and White. 43.

⁴⁴ Rogin. “Kiss Me Deadly.” 6.

⁴⁵ “‘Moms’ Denounced as Peril to Nation.” New York Times. 28 April 1945. 11.

of his speech, “Dr. Strecker pulled no verbal punches in indicting the doting ‘mom’ for her sins of commission and omission against her children and therefore against the nation.”⁴⁶ Strecker’s writing style was slightly less bizarre than that of Wylie’s dogmatic doctrine, but his indictment of “Mom” bore striking resemblance just the same.

As a well-known psychiatrist and military consultant, Strecker solidified the pathologization of neurotic motherhood. In *Their Mothers’ Sons*, he argued that although many cases of homosexuality result from “biological deviations,” often “it seems reasonable to implicate an immaturity determined by mom and her wiles.”⁴⁷ In his chapter called “Momarchies,” he linked fascism to national momism, “Naziism was... a mom surrogate with a swastika for a heart.”⁴⁸ Of Japan he said, “Nipponese fatalistic bravery was ... armed with a Samurai sword and bedecked in a ceremonial robe, concealing the most gigantic and cruelest mom fraud ever perpetuated upon millions of socially immature human beings.”⁴⁹ Using the language of “immaturity” to describe the purported products of momism, Strecker tied bad mothers to sexual, social, and political deviance—all threats to the stability of democratic nationhood.

In the same year, *Time* magazine featured Strecker and his book in an article titled “Mama’s Boys,” which discussed the Army discovery of over 2,400,000 “psychoneurotics,” rejected in the draft or later discharged.⁵⁰ According to the article, “Four-fifths of those discharged had cracked up under training-camp discipline before they saw any fighting.”⁵¹ Strecker, an expert, helped diagnose such soldiers: “Dr. Strecker argues that ‘smother love’ was

⁴⁶ Meyer, Eugene. Foreword. *Their Mothers’ Sons: The Psychiatrist Examines an American Problem*. By Edward Strecker. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1946. 5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*: Strecker, Edward. *Their Mothers’ Sons: The Psychiatrist Examines an American Problem*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1946. 128.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 133.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 138-139.

⁵⁰ “Mama’s Boys.” *Time*. 25 November 1946.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

the root of the psychoneurotics' trouble.”⁵² An editorial in the Washington Post also featured Strecker as an “outstanding authority on ‘Momism’” and its “menace” to national security.⁵³ No work of mother-blaming would be complete without a mantra similar to that of Wylie. The author, who endorsed Strecker, summarized his book: “A timely warning concerning a system which condemns enormous numbers of men to a miserable, maladjusted life because ‘Mom’ has never weaned her son emotionally.”⁵⁴ Over-bearing mothers supposedly condemned their sons to emasculation and misery. In her advice column, Mary Hayworth recommended Strecker’s book as a “constructive study” of momism that prescribes “recuperative measures” for afflicted offspring.⁵⁵ Through his psychiatric work in and after World War II, Strecker heightened awareness about momism as a threat to national health and security.

In 1950, A.L. Weiner wrote an article for a medical journal titled “ ‘Momism’ and the American Family” in which he endorsed Strecker’s mother-blaming works. Like Strecker, Weiner blamed “dominant” mothers for homosexuality and other aspects of societal crisis⁵⁶. Like Wylie, he claimed that the American family had become increasingly matriarchal and thus failed at producing individuals capable of functioning in American democratic society, “In doing this, we have weakened ourselves by producing inadequate descendents to maintain and develop our culture, and perhaps are sowing the seeds of our own destruction.”⁵⁷ In Weiner’s analysis, preservation of American culture and democracy seemingly hinged on the maintenance of rigid gender roles. Although less extreme than that of Wylie and Strecker, Weiner employed the rhetoric of mother-blaming to subtly argue for containment of female power at home and in the workplace. He criticized female dominance in the home, yet argued that the emancipation of

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ “Momism.” Washington Post. 11 February 1951. B4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ “Unconscious Freighted with Nameless Fear, Guilt.” Washington Post. 25 March 1953. 26.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 201, 205.

⁵⁷ Weiner, A.L. “‘Momism’ and the American Family.” Journal of the American Osteopathic Association. Vol. 4 No. 1 (1950): 206.

women and female employment also compromised family life. Hence, Weiner's perspective embodied one of the most astounding contradictions of mother-blaming, because he simultaneously condemned both "negligent" and "overbearing" mothers in a context where it took so little to be characterized as either or even both.

From the mid 1940s to the mid 1950s, momism permeated popular media more than ever before. The enormous postwar expansion to the suburbs entailed new conditions that precipitated fears of "suburban matriarchy" and "the fear that wives and mothers were powerful, perhaps more powerful than their husbands."⁵⁸ The roots of this concern grew partly out of the structure of suburban life in which fathers typically left to work for the greater part of the day, leaving mothers as the sole caretakers of their children and managers of the home. Writers often saw suburban life as a feminizing force carrying negative cultural repercussions.⁵⁹ A Washington Post article titled "Feminine Suburbia, Mental Health Risk" discussed Dr. Leonard Duhl's argument that the suburban "matriarchal set-up" caused mental health hazards:

Dr. Duhl does not blame women... The suburban wife by necessity has to spend her days in a round of chauffeuring, marketing, attending to family business. She must assume the complete administration of the home and discipline of the children. The absence of industry from the suburbs and of men teachers from the elementary schools results in many suburban children having no daytime contact with men except through the postmen and garbage collectors.⁶⁰

Duhl warned that feminized suburban life might lead to mental illness or juvenile delinquency.⁶¹

The absence of fathers—tied to the corporate occupational sphere—exacerbated concerns regarding overbearing mothers.⁶²

⁵⁸ Breines, Wini. Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties. Boston: Beacon Books, 1992. 43.

⁵⁹ Gilbert, James. Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 191.

⁶⁰ Lindsay, Malvina. "Feminine Suburbia, Mental Health Risk." Washington Post. 3 October 1955. 18.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Breines. Young White and Miserable. 44.

In the same year that Weiner's article appeared in the neuropsychiatry supplement of a medical journal, Frank Colby's article "Take My Word for It" in the Los Angeles Times listed a few new words and terms recently entering the vocabulary of Americans. 'Momism' appeared on this short list, which attests to popular awareness about the topic.⁶³ In an entertainment column, one writer observed:

Momism, a scathing word invented by Philip Wylie to describe more excessive forms of mother worship in this country, runs rampant on televised soap opera too, but the variations on TV, it seems to me are even more numerous and malignant.⁶⁴

Magazines and newspapers featured quizzes, polls, and rhetorical questions like "Who's the Boss in Your Family?" and "Are American Moms a Menace?"⁶⁵ Such articles frequently cited Wylie and his expert posse, and furthered prescriptive advice for "doting mothers," such as:

1. Don't breast-feed or bottle-feed your boy any longer than absolutely necessary, and don't dress or bathe him beyond the time he can care for himself.
3. Don't treat your son like a lover. Avoid excessive fondling and kissing (particularly "mouth kissing").
10. If you are widowed, or divorced, don't try to turn your son into a substitution for your husband, or make him feel that he will be an ingrate if he marries and has a home of his own.⁶⁶

In the Ladies' Home Journal, an expert-authored article titled "The Overprotective Mother" told a cautionary tale about Ronnie, an "overindulged" nine-year-old child whose parents had to seek his advice to remedy the misdoings of his smother-mother.⁶⁷ This exemplifies the postwar trend in which male experts advised female readers on how to conduct themselves with their sons.

The dichotomy between Spock's beloved mothers and the villainous "moms" of Wylie's invention emerges in such articles. While many articles endorsed Spock's form of attentive parenthood, articles in the same time period warned that if mothers smothered their children,

⁶³ Colby, Frank. "Take My Word For It; Words To Learn." Los Angeles Times. 14 Aug 1950. A5.

⁶⁴ Crosby, John. "Momism Running Rampant On Televised Soap Opera." Washington Post. 2 September 1953. 29.

⁶⁵ "Who's the Boss in Your Family?" Washington Post. 9 February 1952. B4.; Scheinfeld, Amram. "Are American Moms a Menace?" Ladies' Home Journal. November 1945. *Rpt. in* Walker, Nancy A., ed. Women's Magazines 1940-1960: Gender Roles and the Popular Press. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998. 108.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Bundesen, Herman N. "The Overprotective Mother." Ladies' Home Journal. March 1950. 67.

they could damn their sons to “sissification” and emasculation. In a 1948 Washington Post article, one writer expressed skepticism of scapegoating mothers for masculine weakness:

Nearly everyone is taking a whack at ‘mom’ these days. She is blamed not only for all the psychoneurotics that the war uncovered, but for the Nation’s alarming mental illness and juvenile delinquency, for the boyishness of American men, for virtually all adults who are soft, weak, selfish, maladjusted, incompetent.⁶⁸

In her article “Politics in an Age of Anxiety: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in Masculinity,” K.A. Cuordileone cites this popularity of experts like Wylie and Strecker as proof of American apprehension regarding the status of men, “The dread that American men had grown soft was voiced in widely read and best-selling publications... weak men and helpless boys victimized by parasitic women.”⁶⁹ Regardless of whether articles proposed or opposed mother-blaming, they always underscored the perceived connection between female power and masculine crisis.

As Cuordileone suggests, concerns about male “softness” appear continuously throughout American history. However, in the 1940s and 1950s, critics and experts extended problems beyond physical capacity into the realm of the psyche. This extension carried greater significance in the postwar period, because “loss of self was no small concern in the Cold War.”⁷⁰ The language of momism represents a “new ideological context in which men’s problems were often framed.”⁷¹ In the Cold War context, concerns about masculinity and femininity could reach existential proportions of personal and national catastrophe.

The rigidity of gender roles during this era is central to decoding the social, political, and cultural implications of blaming mothers for supposed male inadequacies. With women entering the work force in record numbers and simultaneously participating in the highly celebrated “cult

⁶⁸ Lindsay, Malvina. “Society’s Scapegoat.” The Washington Post. 18 Jan 1947. 4.

⁶⁹ Cuordileone, K.A. “Politics in an Age of Anxiety: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis of American Masculinity, 1949-1960.” Journal of American History (2000): 523.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 526.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*



of domesticity” in which they managed all matters of the home, many men felt that they had truly been undermined on multiple fronts. Close textual analysis of psychiatric literature like that of Strecker and Weiner reveals motives far beyond concern for the mental health of young boys: their works engage in a broader project of attempting to restore traditional gender roles. In this regard, momism can be understood as a rhetorical and political strategy which male experts propagated to contain female power and self-

determination.

Deferment to experts continued as mother-blaming spread to the more visible medium of popular film. Rogin argues, “The feminine mystique came to dominate American culture and society at the same time that the cold war took over politics. Cold War cinema emerged from that conjunction.”⁷² Cold War films like My Son John and Manchurian Candidate are highly illustrative of the “expert” position that bad mothers threatened national security. They each link the mother figure to treason by proxy of their communist sons.

The 1952 film My Son John marks a key moment in the mother-blaming trajectory—an expansion from print to performance. Furthermore, the movie embodies fears of communism coupled with fears of bad, powerful mothers. The director, Leo McCarey, portrayed fears of homosexuality and momism in the film. Rogin points to the film as a blatant example of mother-blaming, and how “Cold war films imply that domestic ideology, far from protecting America

⁷² Rogin. “Kiss Me Deadly.” 6.

against alien ideas, generated aliens from within its bosom.”⁷³ As with many other anti-communist Cold War films, My Son John linked communism to deviance, and deviance to improper childrearing.⁷⁴ The “demonic” version of domestic ideology emerges through this connection between mothers and communism.

In My Son John, the father is threatening but ineffective, while the mother is possessive and influential.⁷⁵ John, the main character, associates with academics and argues politics with his father Dan, an American Legionnaire. The father is an old-fashioned schoolteacher who can’t seem to command the respect of his son, and literally hits John over the head with the family Bible in response to his insolence.⁷⁶ On the other hand, John’s flirtatious mother Lucille “adores and defends him.”⁷⁷ In Running Time, Nora Sayre highlights the mother/son relationship in the film as an “exotic mutation” compared to other films of the Forties and Fifties that emphasize mother/son relationships.⁷⁸

Excessive mothering leads to sexual and political deviance in My Son John.⁷⁹ Sayre describes John’s mother as evoking a being “whom one wouldn’t want to unleash in any nursery.”⁸⁰ Lucille is a textbook “mom.”⁸¹ She passionately embraces her adult son, and frequently recalls moments from his childhood with a seemingly demented nostalgia. “You were the gurglingest baby,” she tells him.⁸² John’s flirtations with his mother and hostilities towards his father are code for homosexuality and communism.⁸³

⁷³ *Ibid.* 13.

⁷⁴ Schwartz, Richard. Cold War Culture: Media and the Arts, 1945-1990. New York: Facts on File, 1998. 206-207.

⁷⁵ Sayre, Nora. Running Time: Films of the Cold War. New York: Dial Press, 1982. 94.

⁷⁶ “The New Pictures.” Time. 7 April 1952. 19 December 2006 <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,816315,00.html>>.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Sayre. Running Time. 96.

⁷⁹ Schwartz. Cold War Culture. 206-207.

⁸⁰ Sayre. Running Time. 96-97.

⁸¹ Whitfield, Stephen. The Culture of the Cold War. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. 138.

⁸² Sayre. Running Time. 96.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

John loves his mother, but also can not stand her erratic behavior at times. His intimacy with her ultimately yields both psychological and political danger, “John has become a communist, the film implies, because of the liberal ideas and sexual availability of his mother.”⁸⁴ In The Culture of the Cold War, Stephen Whitfield explains that because it was not possible to criticize economic or social conditions in the United States that produced such “deviance,” many Cold War films depicted family as the primary source of communism and internal threat.⁸⁵ Therefore, films like My Son John drew attention to “moms,” even when the primary concern was an anti-communist message.

Predictably, My Son John generated a fair amount of controversy and discussion. The Los Angeles Times featured the film in an article titled “M’Carey Picture Valiant in Purpose,” and described the film as containing more “psychology” than “melodrama,” perhaps alluding to the film’s use of expert mother-blaming ideology.⁸⁶ The Catholic Institute of the Press awarded McCarey the 1952 Literary Prize partly in recognition of the film. Although My Son John did not create a lasting impression in the way that other Cold War films did, it clearly conveyed Wylie’s message through an anti-communist frame, as did Manchurian Candidate ten years later.

The 1955 film Rebel without a Cause emerged in a time of increasing worry about deviant behavior of any kind—be it sexual, legal, or political. Breines offers insight into the postwar panic regarding delinquency in Young, White, and Miserable:

Juvenile delinquency, a major 1950s preoccupation, was construed as evidence of social and familiar disintegration. Parents worried about how to raise well-adjusted children. It was argued that fathers were too absent or not absent enough; that mothers were too involved in their children’s lives, especially their son’, creating homosexuals and sissies.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Rogin. “Kiss Me Deadly.” 14-16.

⁸⁵ Whitfield. Culture of the Cold War. 136.

⁸⁶ Schallert, Edwin. “M’Carey Picture Valiant in Purpose.” Los Angeles Times. 23 April 1952. A9.

⁸⁷ Breines, Wini. Young White and Miserable. 8.

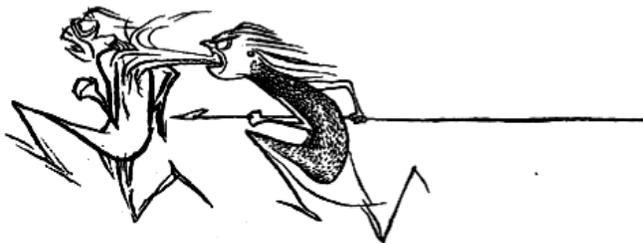
During this time, popular newspapers and magazines portrayed both delinquency and homosexuality as epidemics on the rise.

Delinquency statistics and headlines prevailed in newspapers, featuring heated debates over the nature and cause of the problem. One 1953 article titled “Delinquency Blamed on Home Failure” is particularly illustrative; it recapped a forum on curbing delinquency in which speakers emphasized that “the major cause of juvenile delinquency ‘rests in the home and its failures’.”⁸⁸ Another article from the same year described senatorial concern for delinquency: “Senators... have urged the Senate to authorize an investigation of juvenile delinquency by a Senate Judiciary subcommittee.” The article went on to say that “home factors” as the cause for delinquency are clear “to experts” but often not recognized by the parents themselves.⁸⁹ In such media, experts frequently cited working mothers as a cause for delinquency—which revealed the delinquency panics as an additional instance where experts subjected mothers who stepped out of traditional roles to criticism.

Male crisis emerged during World War II in the form of inadequate soldiers; in the context of Cold War suburbs, dominated fathers and the delinquent sons they produced signified another form of masculine failure

thanks to “Mom.” Female advancement in the workplace, paired with the supposed “matriarchal”

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⁸⁸ “Delinquency Blamed on Home Failure.” *Washington Post*. 31 January 1953. 18.

⁸⁹ “U.S. Probe Urged of Juvenile Crime.” *Christian Science Monitor*. 5 March 1953. 3.

nature of domestic suburban life, perpetuated the looming sense that American men lost their autonomy and strength in the postwar era: “At that time, critical observers of middle-class life considered homemakers to be emancipated and men to be oppressed.”⁹⁰

In 1955, a psychiatrist of the National Institute of Health declared suburbia as a conformist “woman’s world” which produced delinquents and increased mental illness.⁹¹ A few years later, The Decline of the American Male described this masculine crisis. One skeptical New York Times reviewer wrote: “Whither, my masters, are we drifting? Well, it would seem that on the gee-whiz evidence of these feverish pages that we are entering a time of Amazonian matriarchy”.⁹² In Men in the Middle, James Gilbert describes the book as a “grim assessment of conformity and impotence.”⁹³ Cuordileone cites The Decline of the American Male as an example of popular fear that “men left passive or fatigued by the many burdens now placed on them” might become deviant, sexually impotent, or “flight from masculinity.”⁹⁴ Although Rebel without a Cause precedes The Decline of the American Male, the book provides cultural context for the film, because it draws a correlation between female empowerment and male disempowerment, and frames masculine crisis as a war between men and women.⁹⁵

Like My Son John, Rebel without a Cause highlighted the tragedy and danger of parental failure, delivering a cautionary message for parents who stray from traditional gender roles in the family. In this way, the film is an indictment of overbearing mothers but also the failing fathers who allow suburban “matriarchy” to taint the next generation of would-be manly men. Stewart Stern, the film’s screenwriter, explains that the protagonist, Jim Stark is a “mixed-up rebel” because his father “lacks decisiveness and strength” and doesn’t stand up to Jim’s domineering

⁹⁰ May. Homeward Bound. 14.

⁹¹ Lindsay, Malvina. “Feminine Suburbia, Mental Health Risk.” Washington Post. 3 October 1955. 18.

⁹² Poore, Charles. “Books of the Times.” New York Times. 3 June 1958. 29.

⁹³ Gilbert, James. Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 208.

⁹⁴ Cuordileone, K.A. “Politics in an Age of Anxiety: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis of American Masculinity, 1949-1960.” Journal of American History (2000): 531.

⁹⁵ Poore, Charles. “Books of the Times.” New York Times. 3 June 1958. 29.

mother.⁹⁶ Jim is an affluent, distressed youth who struggles to come into manhood and gain acceptance from his seemingly more masculine peers. He experiences great difficulty in balancing his inner sensitivity with trying to maintain a masculine façade. When Buzz, the tough alpha-male of the high school gang challenges Jim's masculine courage, Jim defers to his father and asks, "What can you do when you have to be a man?"⁹⁷ But Frank is no help in matters of manliness; he allows his domineering wife to run the household. Jim's ambiguously homosexual friend Plato represents the figure of sexual deviance in the film, and he stirs up the most trouble of them all. Plato's rich parents virtually abandoned him, thus his character serves as an additional connection between deviance and the home.

Rebel without a Cause presented delinquents as victims of bad parenting. Reviews of the film indicate that viewers understood the film as such: " 'Rebel without a Cause' points the finger of blame, in a kind of cold fury, at parents."⁹⁸ Reviews described Jim's father as "spineless" and incapable: "Dean's father is a bumbler, his mother is a nagger."⁹⁹ Although Jim is a "deviant," the blame rests on "mom"; she makes her apron-wearing, emasculated husband panicky, and afraid of her, and her son a "chicken" in the eyes of his peers.¹⁰⁰ The film's inception exemplified more broadly how anxiety regarding the decline of traditional masculinity related to the feminization of suburban life. Rebel without a Cause won nominations for three Oscars and conveyed the mother-blaming message to a broad viewer base through popular culture.

In the 1940s, Spock and Wylie presented opposing approaches to motherhood and national wellbeing: Spock idealized mothers and stressed their importance to a healthy nation,

⁹⁶ Crowther, Bosley. "The Screen: Delinquency." New York Times. 27 October 1955. 28.

⁹⁷ Rebel without a Cause. 1955. Dir. Nicholas Ray. Warner Home Video, 2005.

⁹⁸ MacCann, Richard. "Current Cycle of Films Pointing to a Problem." Christian Science Monitor. 8 December 1955. 11.

⁹⁹ Scheuer, Philip. "James Dean Cheats Car Death in Bit of Film Irony." Los Angeles Times. 30 October 1955. E2.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

while Wylie demonized mothers and blamed them for national problems. In the 1950s, as seen in My Son John and Rebel without a Cause, the glorification and condemnation of mothers became increasingly political as the Cold War intensified. In 1959, Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev engaged in a heated debate at the American Exhibition in Moscow. In the lengthy exchange, Nixon boasted of the attainable American dream with all its comforts and conveniences, while Khrushchev promoted Communist ideals.¹⁰¹ In this ideological battle dubbed the “kitchen debate,” Nixon espoused his firm belief that suburban domesticity and separate gender spheres defined American greatness.¹⁰² For Nixon, the American kitchen—furnished with modern appliances—liberated women. He presented capitalism as the core of democratic freedom, and glorified female domesticity as that which set America apart from the Soviet system that glorified the work of wives and mothers outside the home.¹⁰³ The “kitchen debate” reemphasized the bond between mothers and American democracy by virtue of comparison to the Soviet way of life.

While Nixon idealized domestic motherhood as central to American democracy, other cultural works focused on the supposed political danger of powerful women. In Young White and Miserable, Breines discusses how Cold War propaganda spread the maternal dominance theme, “Subversion was blamed on women who were too independent or who seduced men, sometimes their sons, into being pawns or agents of communism.”¹⁰⁴ While My Son John and Rebel without a Cause both feature dominant mothers, weak fathers and alienated sons, the 1962 film Manchurian Candidate “repeated that triangle and made it demonologically explicit” by

¹⁰¹ May. Homeward Bound. 10.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* 11.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* 11-13.

¹⁰⁴ Breines. Young White and Miserable. 44.

making the mother a communist villain.¹⁰⁵ Based on Richard Condon's 1959 thriller, Wylie's claim that bad mothers were a national threat played out to the extreme in the movie.

In Manchurian Candidate, Mrs. Iselin, a communist conspirator uses her husband John and son Raymond to her own ends. Raymond is repelled by his mother but is completely under her spell. As a domineering, overbearing wife and mother, Mrs. Icelin speaks to her husband and son condescendingly and calls them her "two little boys."¹⁰⁶ She tries to enable communism by using them as pawns and allows communists to brainwash Raymond into killing his fellow soldiers and others upon his return from war. She has inappropriate sexual feelings for Raymond, and kisses him passionately in a private moment.¹⁰⁷ Raymond eventually shoots his mother and commits suicide, believing that no one else will stop his mother and her wicked plan. The recurring symbol of the Queen card—which Raymond repeatedly encounters—reminds the viewer that Raymond's mother drives the evil scheme throughout the film. A moment of ambiguity in which Mrs. Icelin expresses regret about what the communists did to her son suggested she may also be a victim in some way, but Rogin offers an alternate interpretation: "Incest is stronger than Communism in this film." In other words, Mrs. Icelin experiences remorse for what the Soviets did to her son only because of her perverse love for him.¹⁰⁸ A Los Angeles Times article suggests that some viewers agreed: "Communists are the villains also—but less ingenious ones."¹⁰⁹

Reviews of Manchurian Candidate suggest viewers understood the centrality of the mother figure as sexually and politically demonic, "But the most chilling portrayal is reserved for Angela Lansbury as Raymond's politically ambitious mother; it will live, as the saying goes,

¹⁰⁵ Rogin. "Kiss Me Deadly." 16.

¹⁰⁶ The Manchurian Candidate. 1962. Dir. John Frankenheimer. United Artists, 1998.

¹⁰⁷ A nod to Wylie's pseudo-Freudian analysis.

¹⁰⁸ Rogin, Michael. "Kiss Me Deadly." 17.

¹⁰⁹ Scheuer, Philip. "Frankenheimer's 'Candidate' a Big Winner." Los Angeles Times 28 October 1962. 2.

in infamy.”¹¹⁰ In an interview, Lansbury described her character as “a good example of unadulterated evil.”¹¹¹ Viewers noted the “psychological sidelights” of the film—perhaps alluding to Mrs. Icelin’s momism, incestuous love.¹¹² One article described the mother with words that could have come straight from Wylie: “a wildly tense, raging Fascist... evil queen in the raging flesh.”¹¹³ The Manchurian Candidate earned two Oscars nominations, and represents a “last hurrah” in the trajectory of mother-blaming.

The year after The Manchurian Candidate, Betty Friedan wrote The Feminine Mystique, which significantly decreased American regard for experts, and consequently their belief in the culpability of mothers for societal problems. She criticized America’s seeming obsession with psychoanalysis and tried to expose the flawed logic of mother-blaming:

Under the Freudian microscope... it was suddenly discovered that the mother could be blamed for almost anything. In every case history of a troubled child... could be found a mother ... A rejecting, overprotecting, dominating mother. World War II revealed that millions of American men were psychologically incapable of facing the shock of war, of facing life away from their ‘moms’. Clearly something was ‘wrong’ with American women.¹¹⁴

She highlighted the “never-ceasing” capitalistic pressures and “purposeless work” for corporations that kept men from feeling masculine: “Safer to take it out on his wife and his mother than to recognize a failure in himself or in the sacred American way of life.”¹¹⁵ Rather than accepting that some men had somehow failed as “true men” due to their own innate limitations or false societal constructions of masculinity; rather than considering the possibility that some men subverted laws or the political system because of flaws or shortcomings in the American system itself; Wylie and his followers blamed a disease in mothers—momism.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸ Hendrick, Kimmis. “Playing the Role.” Christian Science Monitor. 17 December 1970. 19.

¹¹² Scott, John L. “ ‘Candidate’ Proves a Cinematic Winner.” Los Angeles Times. 9 November 1962. D12.

¹¹³ Coe, Richard L. “ ‘Candidate’ And ‘Gigot’.” Washington Post. 3 November 1962. C13.

¹¹⁴ Friedan, Betty. The Feminine Mystique. New York: Norton, 1963. 189.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* 203.

Friedan traced the beginnings of mother-blaming to Sigmund Freud, “The old prejudices... merely appeared in the forties, in Freudian disguise.”¹¹⁶ She analyzed Freud’s upbringing in the culture of Victorian Europe, “To Freud... women were a strange, inferior, less-than-human species.”¹¹⁷ Thus, when modern social scientists and psychoanalysts reinterpreted Freud’s theory of femininity—and applied it literally to American women—it resulted in misunderstanding.¹¹⁸ Worth mentioning then is Wylie’s unusual upbringing; his mother died when he was five, and his father was a fire-and-brimstone Presbyterian minister who constantly reprimanded him, which he deeply resented.¹¹⁹ Perhaps Freudian theory appealed to Wylie in part because women seemed mysterious to him as they did to Freud in his youth.

In a collection of essays called Not June Cleaver, Joanne Meyerowitz offers insight into the importance of Friedan’s book, “In Friedan’s formulation, the writers and editors of mass-circulation magazines... were the ‘Frankensteins’ who had created this ‘feminine monster’.”¹²⁰ Friedan discredited the claims of Wylie and his followers and criticized the voice that magazines and other elements of popular culture gave to mother-blaming and the inculcation of rigid gender roles.

In the first chapter titled “The Problem That Has No Name,” Friedan described the silent suffering of suburban wives, “dependent on the latest word from the experts.” She argued that with motherhood under such a critical spotlight, “one false step could mean disaster.”¹²¹ In her discussion of Spock, she points out that many American mothers are too unsure of themselves: “They bring up their children literally according to his book—and call piteously to him for help

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* 103.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* 108.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Miller, James. “The Man-Who Hates ‘Mom’.” Los Angeles Times. 30 March 1947. F4.

¹²⁰ Meyerowitz, Joanna, ed. Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994. 229.

¹²¹ Friedan. The Feminine Mystique. 197.

when the book does not work.”¹²² Experts upheld the “feminine mystique” and undermined the authority of women on their own lives. Women listened:

Experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training... how to dress, look, and act more feminine and make marriage more exciting; how to keep their husbands from dying young and their sons from growing into delinquents.¹²³

Friedan encouraged women to reassess their contingent status as mothers and wives, and question the “feminine mystique” which limited their fulfillment. According to Friedan, personal concerns did not always require deferral to experts:

Even the best psychoanalyst can only give her the courage to listen to her own voice... To face the problem is not to solve it. But once a woman faces it, as women are doing today all over America without much help from the experts... she begins to find her own answers... see through the delusions of the feminine mystique.¹²⁴

She argued the gender anxiety that turned so many Americans to experts after World War II resulted in part from larger national problems that private inquiry could not resolve.¹²⁵ However, in spite of this critique of the nation, the book largely called for “self-realization” rather than feminist policy.¹²⁶

In spite of the limitations of the book, The Feminine Mystique empowered women to question the authority of experts. A Los Angeles Times reviewer wrote: “What is wrong, asks Betty Friedan, with American women who ‘have everything’ yet... are running to doctors and psychiatrists... Because, she answers, there is a feminine mystique.”¹²⁷ One professor wrote that the book touched on the contributions of “American men to problems of American women”. Another reviewer said it was a “must” for all concerned with family life or who “care about the

¹²² Friedan, Betty. The Feminine Mystique. 197-198.

¹²³ *Ibid.* 15.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* 338.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* 189.

¹²⁶ Rosen. The World Split Open. 8.

¹²⁷ Armstrong, Charlotte. “The Feminine Mystique Explored.” Los Angeles Times. 2 June 1963. B17.

future of our society.”¹²⁸ Ironically, it seems likely that Friedan’s work as a clinical psychologist afforded her esteem among many critics.

As an expert herself, Friedan derived much of her cultural relevance from the persistence of a “therapeutic ethos” in American culture. Yet even in the context of this striking continuity, the Feminine Mystique said something entirely new about the 1940s dialectic between mother-praising and mother-blaming which Spock and Wylie encapsulated; she argued they both propagated the problematic “mystique” which constrained women to the advice and direction of male experts. Friedan emerged in the 1960s after decades of male-authored books, articles and films that emphasized the importance of motherhood to national wellbeing, and blamed mothers for masculine failure and broader societal problems. The postwar rise of expertise—noted especially in the form of mother-blaming—reflected a desire to defend or salvage traditional gender roles—even if they did not exist to begin with.

Although Wylie, Weiner and the other mother-blammers may seem wildly misogynistic to a contemporary reader, they operated under an extremely constrained framework. That so many Americans turned to them in the first place demonstrated mainstream inability or even unwillingness to broaden notions of masculinity and femininity to more inclusive parameters. Experts did not criticize the national propagation of unrealistic and rigid gender roles. Rather than acknowledging the fluidity and instability of gender in real life, they defined such behavior as pathological, and blamed mothers for it. Friedan highlighted the oppressive consequences of this dynamic, and she encouraged women to seek fulfillment outside of their prescribed gender norms. In doing so, she inverted the prevailing belief that mothers were either saints or villains—and exposed how this binary paradigm victimized all women.

¹²⁸ The Feminine Mystique by Betty Friedan. Advertisement. New York Times. 30 June 1963. 171.

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