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# Performing Private Life on the Public Stage: Tracing Narratives of Presidential Family Lives, Leisure and Masculinities in US News Media

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**PERFORMING PRIVATE LIFE ON THE PUBLIC STAGE:  
TRACING NARRATIVES OF PRESIDENTIAL FAMILY LIVES, LEISURE AND  
MASCULINITIES IN US NEWS MEDIA**

by

Kathryn M. Kallenberger

A Thesis Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts  
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at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May 2015

ABSTRACT  
PERFORMING PRIVATE LIFE ON THE PUBLIC STAGE:  
TRACING NARRATIVES OF PRESIDENTIAL FAMILY LIVES, LEISURE AND  
MASCULINTIES IN US NEWS MEDIA

by

Kathryn M. Kallenberger

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2015  
Under the Supervision of Professor Richard K. Popp

Images and stories about US presidents' family lives, private vacations and athletic identities are constants in the political news media landscape. These news representations texture and shape how the presidents are envisioned in popular imagination as powerful political figures and embodiments of contemporary masculinities. This study explicates US news media representations of President Bill Clinton and President Barack Obama in select mainstream political news publications from the 1990s to the 2000s. This study further considers how the cultural forces of heteronormativity, patriarchy, Baby Boomer masculinity, class, race and taste influenced popular presidential images. Much of the news discourse regarding presidents as private people, as men of family and leisure and taste, sought to create piecemeal mosaics of powerful men. But this genre of political storytelling also ruminated on larger cultural concerns about masculinity, authenticity, identity and persona within political journalism and political culture at large.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER II: FAMILY LIFE.....	28
Clinton Family.....	32
Obama Family.....	37
Conclusion.....	45
CHAPTER III: VACATION AND SPORTS.....	48
Vacation.....	49
Sports.....	66
Conclusion.....	79
CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION.....	82

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## ***I: Introduction***

In US politics, no public office provokes ethical and cultural divisiveness quite like the presidency. No other job seeker or public figure is subject to as much scrutiny and held to as high moral standards as the president. No other job candidate is subject to a yearlong self-marketing campaign to convince more than 240 million people to choose him or her for the job. Due to the hyper-public nature of the US presidency, divisions between presidents' public and private spheres have collapsed and created an opportunity to examine how media representations of the president's private or personal life contribute to and color his personal brand or image. Published photographs, anecdotes, news stories and personal details about the president circulate in news media and culture, contributing to his public image, creating an endless stream of hints about who the president is as a human, rather than a larger than life image, persona or projection.

Analysis of how popular media representations shape a president's image will help determine how two major dimensions of his personal life, family and leisure, are conceived of in popular discourse and how the news media envisages the president as a private citizen with a private or inner life. News media's representations of each president's private life and personal image can be used as a vehicle not only for historicizing and humanizing one of America's most multidimensional public figures, but also for exposing how the larger forces of gender, hegemonic masculinity, taste, and image shape and constrain these grand narratives of the president as the country's most visible citizen.

To investigate how presidential private lives are constructed for public consumption, newsworthy moments or events that influenced how the presidential image

may have been perceived will serve as sites of analysis. This includes the sort of snapshots or windows into the inner workings of a president's family dynamic and a president's hobbies and leisurely pursuits. News media circulate narratives about the presidents' private lives that contain encoded symbols and ideas that contribute to the larger presidential image or brand. However, the presidents' counter-narratives, asserted through pseudo-events and self-conscious images constructed for public consumption, often tell a different story. This discursive struggle for control of the presidential narrative and private image will serve as the object of interest, but the analysis will focus specifically on the news media discourses surrounding Bill Clinton (1992-2000) and Barack Obama (2008-2016), the two most recent Democratic presidents. Limiting the investigation to two same-party presidents who were born in the Baby Boomer generation will ensure the presidents' images were constructed and existed in a somewhat similar media, political and cultural landscape.

Clinton and Obama's presidencies are bound in popular imagination by the strikingly similar ways in which news media depicted them as the first two Democratic presidents to embody the masculine ideals of a decidedly Baby Boomer mentality. However, it is critical to note that Clinton was born in 1946, on the very front end of what is considered the beginning of the Baby Boom. Obama, born in 1961, is on the polar opposite side of the Boom.<sup>1</sup> In this way, Clinton serves as a site for investigating the generational blend of the Silent Generation and the Baby Boomers, whereas Obama may be viewed as a unique blend of Baby Boomer and Generation-X social, political and cultural values. Episodic news media coverage of these presidents' private lives, which

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<sup>1</sup> William Strauss and Neal Howe. *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584-2069* (Fort Mill, SC: Quill, 1992).

usually sought to expose some new facet of a president's true character or authentic self, added to the grand narratives of the president as a humanized or relatable figure. By constructing images for public consumption, news media presented the public with a larger than life representation of the president, and these representations were consumed, perceived and interpreted in myriad ways. This polysemy of presidential images presented a historical conundrum in terms of understanding and documenting how the president, as a human with emotions, personal interests and weaknesses, was understood both in his historical moment and in posterity.

News media construct hyperreal versions of these already mediated and ambiguous "private" scenes, rather than reflecting authentic, complete or uninterrupted narratives. Presidential representations are designed by image consultants, performed through a president's self-conscious performance of the masculine self, and filtered through journalists and their institutional and everyday practices. Voters typically consume these images and other political news out of context as isolated, episodic or fragmented narratives that provide no cohesive whole.<sup>2</sup> Presidents and their consultants can manipulate this fragmented image making and reporting process for political gain, but the effect of these counter-narratives or counter-images is beyond the scope of this project. It is crucial, however, to note that this contentious, fraught process of political image making contributes to the fragmentation of politics and political storytelling.

In general, the primary sources for investigation into these and the other forces at work in presidential mythologizing will be the various stories told by news and entertainment media outlets that contributed to the overarching narrative of a president as

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<sup>2</sup> W. Lance Bennett, *The Politics of Illusion* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Longman, 2011), 44-48.



both a politician at work and a semi-private citizen with an intimate personal life. To support these arguments, analysis and synthesis of sources such as print news stories, popular press commentary, and scholarly work on a number of related theoretical issues will provide a sense of how scholars, journalists, pundits and members of the constituency understood, responded to and later reflected on the president as a person and not just a politician. To be clear, this project is not an industry analysis; it does not seek to expose the inner workings of the political journalism industry or analyze the news practices of individual journalists. The focus is on presidential image crafting and how news media is a central force in constructing and circulating popular ideas and discourses about the presidents.

A number of research questions will guide analysis and interpretation. What might news stories about a president's family and leisure time reveal about the politics of privacy, hypermasculinity and Baby Boomer masculinity, gender, class and taste? What kinds of symbols, signs, images or language are used to construct a desirable presidential image in contemporary politics? What stories or larger cultural narratives are the news media telling with stories about the president's family or free time? What might these carefully constructed scenes and how they are reported reveal about how the president's character, core inner being, or authentic self was represented or perceived? What do stories about the presidents' private lives tell us about modern politics, the state of the presidency and how citizens might understand political power? What larger ideas or meanings about government and institutional power might voters take away from news media coverage of presidential private lives?

### *Literature Review*

A number of concepts provide the foundation and structure for this study of presidential image making. The distinction between public and private life, news media's construction of reality, performance of the self, heteronormative masculinity as it relates to class and taste, and politics as marketing or commerce are competing forces in the politics of presidential branding and image making. Gender and masculinity in particular factor into the whole of a president's image and brand. Gender dichotomies and gender difference are crucial keys for understanding traditional divisions between the public and private spheres. However, divisions between a politician's public and private lives are ambiguous. As a highly designed and mediated public figure, the president has no apolitical version of the self. Presidents can expect no semblance of privacy, even in supposedly personal time in the "private" sphere. Presidential image making is an intricate combination of forces such as class, taste, symbols and marketing, all of which are influenced by hegemonic masculine power and sex difference. The intersection of these concepts, news media texts and popular discourses is the site of this paper's investigation.

The body of literature, as well as the competing conceptual forces and tensions at work, regarding presidential images, elections, campaigning and media is massive. The concepts highlighted here are certainly not exhaustive, but they do cover the ground crucial to understanding the unique interactions of the presidency and privacy, masculinity, representation and the construction of political realities in Clinton and Obama's historical moment. The literature cited and synthesized below provides the richest body of work for analyzing the larger cultural forces that define and texture news

media representations of the US presidency. Focusing on both well-established concepts in addition to connecting previously underexplored ideas will yield unique insight into US presidential private life as it relates to family, leisure and power.

### **Distinctions of Public and Private Life**

Despite the pervasiveness of the public / private dichotomy in the discourse of presidential representation, this distinction is spurious. Stories about prominent people's private lives "raise the question of where we draw the line between public and private life, and of how where that line is drawn can be to the benefit of private interests as well as of the public interest."<sup>3</sup> A modern president must "expect that the zone of privacy from the press and opposing party is minimal at best."<sup>4</sup> The presidency is a 24-hour a day job and any demarcation of what constitutes "official" state business and "unofficial" personal business is uncertain. Generally, the public sphere is a social space where private citizens discuss public matters such as business, politics, labor and commerce,<sup>5</sup> "free from both state and market influence."<sup>6</sup> The private sphere serves as a respite from politics, public concerns and self-presentation. The private sphere is usually conceptualized as the space in which a private citizen may be free from "social compulsion and political pressure." The personal, individualized sphere encompasses the dimensions of people's lives in which they embody their authentic selves and are free to engage in creative, intimate and other self-interested pursuits.

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<sup>3</sup> Simon Dawes, "Privacy and the Freedom of the Press: A False Dichotomy," in *Media and Public Shaming: Drawing the Boundaries of Disclosure*, ed. Julian Petley (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2013), 44.

<sup>4</sup> Neal Kumar Katyal, "Executive Privilege and the Clinton Presidency: The Public and Private Lives of Presidents," *William & Mary Bill of Rights Journal* 677 (2000).

<sup>5</sup> Jurgen Habermas, Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article," *New German Critique* 3 (1974): 49-52.

<sup>6</sup> Julian Petley, "On Privacy: From Mill to Mosley," in *Media and Public Shaming: Drawing the Boundaries of Disclosure* (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2013), xv.

Presidents have long invoked executive privilege for political purposes but also for personal gain, ostensibly trying to protect the private, intimate details of their lives.<sup>7</sup> In modern presidencies, these details have been sexual<sup>8</sup> or in some way relating to the body or the biological, implying a desperate urge to protect the intimate, vulnerable details of private life. However, stories and legends of presidents' "sexual peccadilloes" have, since the office's inception, plagued the presidency that was supposedly modeled on the "personality, dignity and restraint of George Washington himself."<sup>9</sup> Similar conversations of whether the president is ever "above the law" in terms of secretive political maneuvers as well as private matters have also circulated.<sup>10</sup> These conversations are largely concerned with this same conundrum of separating unofficial or private behavior from official, presidential behavior. The line between public and private, official and unofficial, working and non-working hours is "nearly impossible to draw in theory or discern in practice,"<sup>11</sup> indicating "no act of a president can be considered as purely private."<sup>12</sup> The president's words and actions almost all fall into the category of "semiofficial" because of his hypervisibility and the nebulous, overlapping distinctions of public and private life.

Just as the divisions between public and private are all but collapsed for a hyperpublic figure like the US president, distinctions between which aspects of his or her life are true or authentic and which parts are exaggerated or fabricated are equally tenuous. Although some of a president's activities are spontaneous or improvised, much

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<sup>7</sup> Katyal.

<sup>8</sup> Esmond Wright, "The Private Lives of the American Presidents," *Contemporary Review* 276 (2000): 151.

<sup>9</sup> Wright, 149.

<sup>10</sup> Joel B. Grossman and David A. Yalok, "The 'Public' versus the 'private' President: Striking a Balance between Presidential Responsibilities and Immunities," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 28.4 (1998): 821.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 822.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*.

of his life, at least the public life news media captures, is planned, constructed and performed. However, the president's private life, his supposed free or personal time with family or hobbies, is also constructed for media consumption. The aspects of his private life, perhaps even more than his public life, are carefully designed so as not to offend or alienate voters. Each presidential move or behavior captured by news media, whether public or private, is a non-spontaneous event designed to communicate certain messages, values and ideas that must appear human, relatable and tactful to voters. These carefully constructed moments of "privacy" or leisure time are particularly problematic because they claim to represent reality but in fact create a false reality in which the president is not his "authentic self" but exists in a version of reality fraught with ever-fluid complexities of truth, performance, representation, identity and persona.

### **Presidential Image Construction and Politics as Performance**

Sociological theory maintains everyone is aware of their self-conscious "presentation of the self in everyday life,"<sup>13</sup> and this presentation is amplified in the political realm because of the reach and "scale of projection" involved in political image making.<sup>14</sup> Political image making is as much about constructing likeable and electable personae as it is about suggesting something about a politician's true or authentic political character. Presidential image construction is "at once concerned with presentation and with the interface of presentation, personality, and policy."<sup>15</sup> Further, political personhood, the matrix of a politician's interacting personal and professional

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<sup>13</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959).

<sup>14</sup> Corner and Pels, 68.

<sup>15</sup> Shawn Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles, *Constructing Clinton: Hyperreality & Presidential Image-Making in Postmodern Politics* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002), 4.

lives, must be considered in terms of symbolic management, language and expression and the political body in action.<sup>16</sup> A full understanding of the “cultural role of persona within politics” requires an analysis of the politician’s self-conscious performance and management of symbolic associations.<sup>17</sup> In the cross-section of the personal, the political and the popular, the identity of the politician is “most emphatically and strategically put forward with inflections toward what are perceived as the contours of popular sentiment or sectional value.”<sup>18</sup> These popular values or sentiments a president must pander to highlight the crucial factor of connecting to the constituency’s dominant cultural and historical values, not just the political ones.

A president’s persona must embody dominant values and concerns of a historical moment. “A president cannot adopt the image of a ‘common man...’ at a time when the public expects presidents to be great leaders. Presidents cannot adopt the image of a ‘master politician’ in a time when the public resoundingly abhors politicians.”<sup>19</sup> A president must read the zeitgeist and determine which values are the most universal, most salient and most easily reproduced. This concept of adopting a “historical image” appropriate to a president’s cultural and historical circumstances has been traced from the “common man” image, popular in the nineteenth century, to the “master politician” image favored by midcentury leaders.<sup>20</sup> After the values that created the need for the master politician image were replaced with the values of a new voting generation, the

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<sup>16</sup> Corner and Pels, 69.

<sup>17</sup> John Corner and Dick Pels, “Introduction: The Re-Styling of Politics,” in *Media and the Restyling of Politics* (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 73.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 75.

<sup>19</sup> Richard W. Waterman, Robert Wright and Gilbert K. St. Clair, *The Image-is-Everything Presidency: Dilemmas in American Leadership* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 14.

<sup>20</sup> Waterman, et. al., 29.

“Washington outsider,” image emerged.<sup>21</sup> The Washington outsider distanced himself from the traditional Washington establishment and rhetorically aligned himself with romantic notions of a simple man thrust into presidential politics. After the “outsider” image lost some of its symbolic power (but certainly not all), John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon demonstrated the increasing role of image making and image manipulation when “*politics* was increasingly taking on a negative connotation.”<sup>22</sup> Ronald Reagan is considered one of the master media manipulators and the embodiment of the “image-is-everything” presidency. In a time when “television became the primary means of getting to know the issues and candidates,”<sup>23</sup> Reagan, a former actor and radio personality, used his “cool, laid-back style” to appear warm, natural and “soft-spoken, folksy.”<sup>24</sup>

What is most significant about adopting a historically appropriate image is the symbolic visual dimension. Presidents are symbolically associated with an image or sign that signifies the desired values or ideas. Presidents attach themselves to more concrete symbols or place themselves in “associative contexts” such as log cabins standing in for Abraham Lincoln’s frontiersmanship or prolific legislation symbolizing Franklin Roosevelt’s manic activity and political mastery. This is how images and brands are made: by attaching politicians to isolated, visually striking symbols, metaphors, phrases, values or ideas. Images are not meant to be tasted for texture or depth, explicated or thought through. Thus, a president’s carefully constructed image becomes a “visible

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<sup>21</sup> Waterman, et. al., 39.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>23</sup> Robert E. Denton, *The Primetime Presidency of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Praeger, 1988), xi.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 62-67.

public personality”<sup>25</sup> that, despite the reality or truth of the image, acts as a palatable signifier for voters to unthinkingly consume.

This image is often constructed with the pseudo-event, an event designed for the purposes of image making and controlled self-presentation.<sup>26</sup> Pseudo-events are non-spontaneous events such as speeches, appearances, news releases, and interviews that are intended to propagate a message or idea about a politician for the purpose of being reported or reproduced. These events, when covered by news media, are the vehicle for politicians to solidify their images and messages in popular imagination. The pseudo-event is a variety of the hyperreal, a “question of substituting signs of the real for the real.”<sup>27</sup> Representation, particularly news media representation, is itself a form of simulacrum that can reflect reality, mask and denature reality, mask the absence of a reality or exhibit no actual relation to reality whatsoever.<sup>28</sup> For most casual observers of US presidential politics, “...there really is no meaningful distinction between image and ‘reality’” because whether they realize it or not, “...U.S. presidents are the personification of hyperreality.”<sup>29</sup>

The easiest images and symbols to consume are the ones encoded with ideological values that have become so normalized in US culture they are taken for granted and largely unchallenged by those who the dominant ideologies do not serve. Hegemonic masculinity, as an ideological construct, is one of these dominant forces at work in US politics and particularly in presidential image making. Without an appropriately

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<sup>25</sup> Daniel Boorstin, *The Image* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), 187.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles, *Constructing Clinton*, 188.



masculine persona, complete with the normative personal character traits and institutional associations, a candidate will flail on the national stage.

### **Development and performance of heteronormative masculinity**

Gendered political bodies are constituted through symbols and rhetoric. Gender, as a vastly complex social construct, is further complicated in the political arena because the construction of political personae relies so heavily on masculine self-presentation, performance and representation.<sup>30</sup> Just as speeches, soundbites and issues platforms are meant to be analyzed and interpreted by constituents, the political body is a “rhetorical situation to be read” in terms of gender, sexuality and aesthetics.<sup>31</sup> The political body may sometimes be viewed as a text for analyzing because it is the corporeal, material site of identity struggle and cultural tension.<sup>32</sup> Because “political leadership as an ideal has been shaped historically by masculine imperatives” but only “evident by comparison with the feminine,” an analysis of what masculine attributes politicians are expected to embody is essential for understanding how masculine ideals shape the presidential image. How these attributes are made concrete with symbolic rhetoric and display, through media representations as well as the presidential body, is also essential for determining how

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<sup>30</sup> Janis L. Edwards, “Introduction: Politics as Gendered Space,” in *Gender and Political Communication in America: Rhetoric, Representation and Display*, ed. Janis L. Edwards (Washington D.C.: Lexington Books, 2009), xiv;

<sup>31</sup> Jimmie Manning and Cady Short-Thompson, “Gendered Bodies: Considering the Sexual in Political Communication,” in *Gender and Political Communication in America: Rhetoric, Representation and Display*, ed. Janis L. Edwards (Washington D.C.: Lexington Books, 2009), 251; Nathan Stormer, “A Vexing Relationship: Gender and Contemporary Rhetorical Theory,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Gender and Communication*, ed. Bonnie J. Dow and Julia T. Wood (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006), 258.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 256-257.

voters view the president as a person who is not only masculinized or feminized but as a person with an inner life and therefore an inner gender identification.<sup>33</sup>

Aesthetics and symbolic representations can feminize or masculinize candidates, effectively determining how the politician is “read” by voters and by news media, particularly in comparison to opposite-sex politicians. If nurturance, compassion, attractiveness and sensitivity typify the feminized politician, then the symbolic indicators of masculinity or male hood include aggression, competitiveness and pragmatic indifference to sentiment.<sup>34</sup> The instinct to categorize people, especially politicians and political behavior, in sexualized and gendered terms can be explained by the overwhelming force of hegemonic masculinity in US culture and politics. Because hegemonic masculinity is associated with ideas about leadership, mastery and control, the performance of political masculinity requires candidates to display competitiveness and domination, qualities acquired and honed in mostly male-identified social spaces.

Politicians depend heavily on traditionally masculine myths, icons, and character traits derived from and depending on a “hegemonic masculinity that defines presidential image in terms of male-dominated institutions and patriarchally-constructed value system.”<sup>35</sup> These masculine institutional connections are fostered during a politician’s experiences within historically masculine spaces such as politics, the military and athletics.<sup>36</sup> These masculine experiences are represented in campaign materials and

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<sup>33</sup> As Manning and Short-Thompson define it, gender refers to the psychological, mindful aspects of a person’s being (expressed with and through the body) and sex refers to the biological or “assigned” body (252).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 254.

<sup>35</sup> Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles, “Gendered Politics and Presidential Image Construction: A Reassessment of the ‘Feminine Style,’” *Communication Monographs* 63 (1996): 338.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 343.

films,<sup>37</sup> with symbolically charged images and thematic frames, such as airplanes and veterans for military service or team pictures and hunting weapons to connote ideas about athletic glory.<sup>38</sup> Popular press writings and campaign materials in particular depict candidates in typically male roles or spaces that connote power, control and achievement<sup>39</sup> including representations of fatherhood, overt and compulsory heterosexuality, occupational success, frontiersmanship or trail blazing, athletic glory, experience with foreign affairs or economics and military heroism.<sup>40</sup> This ideological assumption that decidedly masculine attributes are not only desirable but also essential for a presidential candidate is a byproduct of a “rhetorical naturalization of sex difference” that acts as a pretext for reinforcing gender hierarchies.<sup>41</sup>

In the contemporary political arena, characterized by spectacle and the impersonal nature of television, candidates must adjust their typically masculine styles of politics and develop a pseudo-intimacy or warmth for the cold and isolating television cameras.<sup>42</sup> Instead of a “factual, analytic, organized and impersonal” style, candidates in contemporary politics must evince a more “feminine style” characterized as “personal, excessive, disorganized and unduly ornamented.”<sup>43</sup> Masculinized attributes and experience, or lack thereof, effectively devalue female or ‘feminized’ male candidates who symbolize different values or life experiences. Male candidates who are appropriately masculine and display the features of normative manhood are rarely

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 344.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Achter, “Racing Jesse Jackson: Leadership, Masculinity and the Black Presidency,” in *Gender and Political Communication in America: Rhetoric, Representation and Display*, ed. Janis L. Edwards (Washington D.C.: Lexington Books, 2009), 110.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 110; Manning and Short-Thompson, 254.

<sup>41</sup> Stormer, 252.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles, *Feminine Style*, 337.

questioned in terms of sexuality or gender. Successful candidates need to strike a balance between masculine experience and the increasingly popular feminine style, leading to a sort of “irony of contemporary image construction” in which candidates exhibit a “‘feminine’ style to promote hegemonically ‘masculine’ images.”<sup>44</sup>

Gender and masculinity are fluid and historically specific constructs. The contemporary manhood that the two Democratic Baby Boomer presidents displayed was colored by the cultural conditions in which they grew up as well as the previous generation’s values and ideals that they may have subconsciously responded to. The fact that these two Democratic presidents fall into the Baby Boomer generation is significant in terms of the types of masculinities presidents displayed and how news media thought about and constructed political images and masculinities. Despite the small age gap, both presidents grew up and were enmeshed in a similar historical moment.

In a period when the definitions and conceptions of manhood were palpably changing, sexual mores were being challenged and women were experiencing the more issues-oriented second wave feminism, masculinity was in more flux than ever. This profound instability created the conditions for the adult male masculinities the children of the 1950s and 1960s, and the two future Democratic presidents, would soon embody. This new masculinity distanced itself from the gritty WWII soldier, the Self-made man and the hardy and happily masculine figure embodied by JFK and cinematic heroes like John Wayne.<sup>45</sup> American manhood was experiencing a backlash against the “Self-Made man,”<sup>46</sup> an archetype idealized for his rags-to-riches success. Baby Boomer masculinity was also influenced by the paradigmatic “man in the gray flannel suit,” the conformist

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<sup>44</sup> Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles, *Feminine Style*, 350.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 212.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

company man of the post-WWII era who is lost in a sea of materialism and spiritual listlessness. As the Vietnam War escalated, one of the “most reliable refuges for beleaguered masculinity, the soldier/protector, fell into disrepute”<sup>47</sup> and made way for new iterations of masculinity to emerge. Children of this era also existed in a period of social turmoil when civil rights and gay rights were becoming increasingly visible social movements. Both movements challenged hegemonic white male masculinity and demanded that black, gay and other disenfranchised males be recognized as real American men.

As therapy and psychoanalysis became more socially acceptable in the 1970s, the language and emotionalism of the therapist’s office took hold in mainstream Western cultures. Words like “healing,” “closure,” “trauma,” and “self-esteem” infiltrated everyday discourse and took on new, often metaphoric meanings for both individuals and societies.<sup>48</sup> Therapy culture’s impact on US politics can be seen in the ways in which private emotions had come to “colonize” public life in the 1970s and beyond. But the impact may also be seen in a newfound interest in the individualized causes of social or political issues like crime or the war on drugs as well as celebrating men’s unapologetic emotionalism, self-awareness and ability to connect and empathize with others. In the 1980s, new masculinities and political culture began to value egalitarianism and softer traits such as warmth, sensitivity, empathy and compassion. The “loosening up”<sup>49</sup> of US politics paved the way for Democratic Baby Boomer presidents’ feminine styles, including their newfound emotionalism, therapeutic language, social liberalism and racial

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 190.

<sup>48</sup> Frank Furedi, *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>49</sup> Sam Binkley, *Getting Loose: Lifestyle Consumption in the 1970s* (Durham: Duke University Press: 2007).

and gender flexibility.

By the 1992 election, Bill Clinton's "new man" defeated George HW Bush's more conventionally macho "schoolyard bully" who had to prove his and America's toughness by defeating smaller enemies or countries.<sup>50</sup> America was seeing its first "two-career couple" in the White House. Clinton embodied the new, sensitive man, and Hillary Rodham Clinton's more traditionally masculine persona helped him exhibit this new masculinity that was taking hold in American culture. The Clintons redefined the political marriage and set the stage for the similarly equal partnership of the Obamas in 2008, setting a precedent for changing ideas about men and women working on equal footing, especially in politics. In addition to demonstrating a distinctly Baby Boomer style of masculinity, Obama's presidency sparked conversations about the precariousness of race in presidential politics and changing notions of black masculinity in US culture.

White heteronormative masculinity's dominance in political culture complicated how news media represented blackness in the 1990s and 2000s. Black masculinity carries a different set of signifiers and ideas than white masculinity. Normative black masculinity is also a performance of athletic glory, occupational success, heterosexuality and cultural pride, but the cultural connotations connected to black masculinity register differently from white masculinity.<sup>51</sup> Contemporary black masculinity is not inherently opposed to whiteness in any natural or logical way but is shaped by media cultures and markets that reflect white male supremacy, values and concerns.<sup>52</sup> Black masculinity is informed by black counter-hegemonic perspectives and criticisms but is fundamentally concerned with reforms of the good black / bad black system of evaluation, "equality

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<sup>50</sup> Kimmel, 211.

<sup>51</sup> Achter, 110.

<sup>52</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Culture* (Boston: South End Press, 1990).

within existing societal structures,” proliferating a diverse and positive body of images of black experience and “decolonizing” black minds.<sup>53</sup> However, if media “have become central to the constitution of social identity,” black masculinity is constructed with images of black manhood and stories of radical black subjectivity that are mediated, produced and circulated in a hegemonically whitewashed news and entertainment media landscape.<sup>54</sup>

Much of a politician’s interactions with news media are performances of normative, naturalized and therefore hegemonic white masculinity. Because of this need to convince the constituency of a politician’s abundant masculinity, a highly self-conscious performance of manhood becomes central to constructing a political persona. This assertion of masculinity and ability to lead a nation is most effectively demonstrated with media representations of a politician’s private family life, a key formative experience of the politician but also for the constituency consuming these images.<sup>55</sup> Images of the president with his family, enjoying himself but still in patriarchal control, are disseminated in hopes voters will connect the paternalistic qualities the president exhibits with his family to the paternalistic and domineering qualities he might exhibit as president, as the father of the theoretical national family.<sup>56</sup> The Nation as Family metaphor is an “unconscious cognitive model” which operates on linguistic and conceptual levels.<sup>57</sup> Presidential performances of fatherhood were often cast in a metaphorical framework that re-coded or reimagined “private” moments and behaviors as

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<sup>53</sup> hooks, 4-5.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 5; Ian Angus and Sut Jhally, *Cultural Politics In Contemporary America* (Routledge, 1998).

<sup>55</sup> Achter, 110.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

semiotic signs of a president's essence or psychological makeup, including his political or philosophical ideologies.<sup>58</sup>

The traditional political conservative view of the national family is as a Strict-Father, and the traditional political liberal sees the government as a Nurturant-Parent.<sup>59</sup> The Strict-Father family is described as “a traditional nuclear family with the father having primary responsibility for supporting and protecting the family...authority...to enforce the rules.”<sup>60</sup> The Nurturant-Parent model values open, two-way communication, mutual love and respect, community, and self-discipline through nurturance and learning from mistakes.<sup>61</sup> In short, the Strict-Father model stresses “discipline, authority, order, boundaries, homogeneity, purity and self-interest” and the Nurturant-Parent model, much like Baby Boomer parenting, stresses “empathy, nurturance, self-nurturance, social ties, fairness and happiness.”<sup>62</sup> The Strict-Father and Nurturant-Parent moral reasoning models, although unusually salient in theory, are sometimes criticized for bias, inattention to the role of media and how much control politicians truly have over their media representations.<sup>63</sup>

The spheres of a president's life were sometimes indiscernible when he, a political body, was imagined in these private familial scenes. Masculinity is a careful performance, a highly self-conscious display of the gendered political self. The proper masculine display, tempered with “feminine style” when appropriate, is yet another constructed and mediated force at work in presidential image making. More than

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 159.

<sup>60</sup> Lakoff, 33.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>63</sup> Jessy J. Ohl, Damien S. Pfister, Martin Nader and Dana Griffin, “Lakoff's Theory of Moral Reasoning in Presidential Campaign Advertisements, 1952-2012,” *Communication Studies* 64.5 (2013), 492.



anything, the model a politician embodies speaks to who the candidate is as a private person with inner thoughts and deep psychological links to family and other non-political institutions. Gender, one of the most intimate and abstract parts of a person, must be represented with symbols and signs, and performed through rhetoric, image and personal taste.

### **Performance of taste**

Taste can be viewed as the physical manifestation of inherently gendered and classed values. Consumer choices, much like political choices, express a person's values and inner being. But also taste, like gender, is highly performative. Taste can be defined as "all the features associated with a person" which the person may only "very partially become conscious"<sup>64</sup> of in everyday life. Not only does personal taste consist of consumer and aesthetic choices, but it encompasses the entire being of a person: their appearance, both chosen and fated, and their exhibited tastes, performed through consumer purchases and loyalties. Further, the body, replete with physical characteristics and aesthetic/consumer choices, may be read as an "index of moral uprightness."<sup>65</sup> In this way, the body is a fully realized text encoded with morals, ethics, values, opinions and other signifiers of inner nature and outer or self-conscious acculturation.

Tastes and aesthetic choices may be viewed as products of a person's social position or class. In political image making, cultivating the candidate's taste and consumer choices to connote proper and acceptable middle-class values is just as important as performing an acceptable version of normative manhood. Because US

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<sup>64</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 174.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 193.

politics operates on a system of dichotomy, one candidate claims to embody what the other does not. The absence of a signifier or a taste is just as significant as the presence of another. Just as taste is often interpreted through opposition, such as necessity / luxury or frugality / comfort, so must presidential image making be viewed as a system defined by opposition or negation. The body, as a site of classed, gendered and dichotomous tastes, is a “social product” that acts as the “tangible manifestation of the ‘person.’” That is, the presidential body is his or her “most natural expression of innermost nature,” signifying both a person’s inner life and their “distance from nature,” how cultured or consciously constructed the outer persona appears.<sup>66</sup>

Personal taste and style manifest in countless ways but few assertions of taste require as much money, time and emotional investment as travel and vacations.<sup>67</sup> Much like a cultivated book collection or wardrobe can signify a person’s acculturation or acquired tastes, travel is a form of expressing one’s values, interests and associations with spaces, places and cultural histories. In theory, travel is a way to escape from the rigors and oppressive, “massive infrastructures” of everyday life; escaping real life by travel was once a “form of anti-consumption.”<sup>68</sup> But choosing a vacation destination gradually became institutionalized, transforming travel into an act of production and consumption. Vacations became commodities, expressions of acculturation or hedonism pursued. Just like a consumer product to display boldly on a shelf, a person’s travelogue gradually became a mark of prestige and pride. But vacation, like any form of materialism or

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<sup>66</sup> Bourdieu, 193.

<sup>67</sup> Orvar Lofgren, *On Holiday: A History of Vacationing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 5.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

consumerism, is highly performative and sometimes viewed as an art form<sup>69</sup> or even “staged authenticity.”<sup>70</sup> All tourist locations have stories, histories and political associations, and a person’s traveling to a location suggests a valuation or deep interest in the world politics that manifest in tourist sites.<sup>71</sup> Travel is a means of “self-fashioning”<sup>72</sup> which “yields observations, encounters and episodes that are free to function as relatively abstract signifiers.”<sup>73</sup> These signifiers suggest something about a person’s deeper self, just as consumer or political action expresses aesthetic or moral values. The travel destination is a powerful expression of personal taste. Everything about a vacation, from accommodations to food to souvenirs to activities to transportation, is all part of the travel performance.<sup>74</sup>

As performances of consumer tastes and political values, vacations are sites for explicating a person’s contradictory roles of consumer in the commercial market and participant in the political realm.<sup>75</sup> But citizens of political address and the consumers of advertising address are also sometimes conflated. The apparently opposing roles of “citizen” and “consumer” are theoretically distinct but have historically been “ever-shifting categories that sometimes overlapped, often were in tension, but always reflected the permeability of the political and economic spheres.”<sup>76</sup> Because romantic notions of democratic participation dominate the narrative of US political history, the economic marketplace, or the tangible site where consumer culture and aesthetic taste manifest, is

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<sup>69</sup> Judith Adler, “Travel as Performed Art,” *American Journal of Sociology* 94.6 (1989).

<sup>70</sup> Edward Bruner, *Culture on Tour: Ethnographies of Travel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 2-3.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>72</sup> Adler, 1368.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 1369.

<sup>74</sup> Bruner, 15.

<sup>75</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 8.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

seen as the site of far lesser value. The politician is a product for whom consumer citizens can cast a vote and therefore express something about themselves just as consumer purchases express something about the person's social or political values.

### **Political branding and marketing**

Presidential candidates are often seen as products.<sup>77</sup> They are merchandise to be developed, marketed, branded, hawked, bought, sold and consumed. Marketing and politics use similar tools for promotion such as advertisements and commercials, telemarketing, “marketing research, market segmentation, targeting, positioning, strategy development, and implementation.”<sup>78</sup> The politician who can conduct market research (polls, etc.) and understand what the voters need and want can craft and sell the most palatable image.<sup>79</sup> Although a comparison of presidential candidates to products is an easy metaphor, it is helpful to extend this idea and think of the politician more as a “service provider” who must constantly “operate in a dynamic environment, fast, changing and full of obstacles that present marketing challenges and require flexibility.”<sup>80</sup>

The presidential campaign is, of course, a matter of connecting to voters with relevant images, symbols and ideas in the shared historical moment. But there is also a larger-than-life “heroic mythos associated with the office.”<sup>81</sup> In contemporary, “postmodern mediated politics,” ideas about the presidency “combine its mythic

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<sup>77</sup> Bruce I. Newman, *The Marketing of a President* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), 9; Nicholas J. O’Shaughnessy and Stephan C. Henneberg, “The selling of the President 2004: a marketing perspective,” *Journal of Public Affairs* 7 (2007): 254.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>81</sup> Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles, *Constructing Clinton: Hyperreality & Presidential Image-Making in Postmodern Politics* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002), 3.

dimensions with the intimacies, the privacies of the individuals in the Oval Office.”<sup>82</sup> Branding the presidential candidate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century means that the president is not just a political figure whose role it is to serve as the personification of the nation and as a “fountainhead of normative wisdom,”<sup>83</sup> but that he or she is a person, a human with relatable emotions, interests and associations. One of the surest ways to have a memorable campaign platform, a memorable product to brand and to sell, is to construct a political image with which voters can attach their own ideas, symbols and images to, much like a company would brand a product with values, symbols and associations.

### *Methodology*

For this study, textual analysis is the best method for explicating representations of presidents’ private lives in larger rhetorical and cultural contexts. Texts are manifestations of a culture’s dominant thoughts, discourses, ideas and values. Textual analysis does not promise to uncover hidden meanings in texts but to offer multiple readings and interpretations that reveal the “prevalent ideologies permeating a particular historical and cultural moment.”<sup>84</sup> Textual analysis will allow for study of how rhetoric, symbols, images and news frames work to construct a presidential image and will also consider the social, cultural and historical contexts which “allowed a text to be considered acceptable and become popular, even common sense.”<sup>85</sup> Observing how symbols, “bodies, voices, emotion, images, and objects serve as discursive vehicles of

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> O’Shaughnessy and Henneberg, 254.

<sup>84</sup> Elfriede Fürisch, “Analyzing Text: The Cultural Discourse in Ethnic Food Reviews,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Media Studies*, ed. Angharad N. Valdivia and Fabienne Darling-Wolf (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 340.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid; Teun A. van Dijk, “The interdisciplinary study of news as discourse,” in *A Handbook of Qualitative Methodologies for Mass Communication Research*, ed. Klaus Bruhn Jensen and Nicholas W. Jankowski (London: Routledge, 1991), 109.

social influence when paired with language”<sup>86</sup> will also help us interrogate the news texts and representations. “Reading” the presidential body as a self-presented text and news reports about the president’s life should expose how presidents sought to brand themselves and what role news media played in shaping this brand.

News media stories and images will serve as the sites of textual analysis. Articles from mass-market newspapers and news magazines, images published in newspapers, magazines and online will be the sites explication and analysis. Online indices such as Readers’ Guide Full Text Mega, Newspaper Source Plus and LexisNexis Academic allow for a direct, systematic approach to sifting through thousands of articles that may pertain to family and leisure in specified time periods. These databases help identify key newsworthy events and stories that may offer windows into presidential image as well as the two dynamics and cultural forces in question. This provides a far more streamlined approach to selecting pertinent articles than physical news archives would require. Therefore, simple digital archive searches for news magazine articles in *Newsweek*, *The New Republic*, *Time*, *People*, for daily news articles in *National Public Radio*, *The New York Times* and occasional other sources will yield a smattering of “private” presidential scenes for analysis.

### *Chapter Descriptions*

Chapter two examines how news media represented the family dynamic with a focus on patriarchy, power, control and intimacy. The presidents displayed many versions of Baby Boomer masculinities in private life, but news representations of these

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<sup>86</sup> Sara McKinnon, “Text-based Approaches to Qualitative Research: An Overview of Methods, Process and Ethics,” In *The International Encyclopedia of Media Studies*, ed. Angharad N. Valdivia and Fabienne Darling-Wolf (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 325.

masculinities were usually colored by or viewed through a lens that privileged the historically white heteronormative perspectives or sentiments that had long dominated the realms of politics and journalism. News discourse tracked the families' rises to prominence and changes in presidential images using metaphors, frameworks, symbols and rhetorical devices to try to understand presidential family dynamics and the new metaphysics of masculinity in Baby Boomer power and politics. The president's perceived control over his family was symbolized by how news media represented the interpersonal relationships and the popular ideas about the family that became associated with their image.<sup>87</sup> His effectiveness as a biological parent was often conflated with his ability to shepherd the nation. News media told the stories that influenced how voters conceived of the presidents as husbands, fathers and politicians in a period that saw the rise of an increasingly "feminized" political culture and the proliferation of a Baby Boomer mentality that was re-thinking traditional conceptions of gender and marital roles.

Chapter three delves into the concepts of fun, leisure and taste. The concept of presidential leisure is made concrete with images of the president on vacations and enjoying sports. Vacations and sports are embodiments of personal tastes and consumer choices. Images of the president on vacation are highly constructed and mediated and beg for consideration of the performances of masculinity, taste and persona as well as the need for presidents to appear appropriately classed and democratic. News media representations of presidential vacations also serve as convenient windows into the

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<sup>87</sup> Noticeably absent from this analysis are news narratives about the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal and subsequent trial. Although the scandal overshadowed much of the final years of Clinton's presidency, many scholars have already addressed this subject in many different lights. Therefore, the scandal will be addressed only when it explicitly surfaces in stories about the Clintons' family life.

tension between public business and unofficial private time. What connect these two dynamics in a person's private sphere- family and leisure- are the underlying themes of intimacy, vulnerability and authenticity that pervade family, vacation and sports narratives. They are tied together because they reveal the particularly deep and largely intangible depths that give texture and definition to a person's "true" or authentic character.

Chapter four will synthesize the research and analyses from the preceding sections and outline the central forces at work in this media phenomenon. Rather than focusing on individual news articles, narrative refrains or persisting ideas about the presidents, this chapter considers the larger cultural discourses and concepts that this genre of political news contributes to or reflects. Finally, the chapter includes a brief deliberation on the importance of studying how news media dissect and psychoanalyze the presidents' private lives for understanding the roles of identity and persona in contemporary political media culture.



## *II: Narratives of Family Life*

News narratives during the campaign process tend to focus on the “horse race” of the election cycle. “Battleground” or swing states are situated as the sites of political and moral struggles, and the political party that “wins” in each state is seen as the victor of a larger battle within the even grander, more sweeping culture wars. The complexities of national politics and policy are lost to more easily digestible red/ blue maps, pie charts depicting poll numbers and close scrutiny of candidates as private, non-political people. News stories that apparently reveal something fragile or personal, that describe or expose a president’s immaterial tastes, morals or non-professional relationships, may be used as devices for understanding the “real” or authentic person occupying the Oval Office. The family dynamic is an interpretive tool for understanding who the president might be beneath the surface of a political veneer. The family’s history, the romanticized story of how it came to together and grew into its contemporaneous self, is a large part of the presidential mythos.

The Clintons famously met at a university library at Yale Law School in 1971. Bill had grown up in Hope, Arkansas and Hot Springs, AK and was later described by Toni Morrison as “the first black president” because he displayed “almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald’s-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas.”<sup>88</sup> Hillary was born in a Chicago suburb and was, by all accounts, a precocious young person whose parents fostered her extraordinary intellect and ambition. The Clintons married in 1975 and moved to Bill’s home state where he established his political career, and Hillary put her political

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<sup>88</sup> Toni Morrison, “Clinton as first black president,” *The New Yorker*, October 1998.

ambitions on the backburner. The Clintons' only child Chelsea was born in 1980 and grew up "poised and blossoming."<sup>89</sup> She often served as a potent symbol of her parents' competency and nurturing style of parenting.

Bill's first political office was Arkansas Attorney General in 1976, and he won the governorship two years later. He held the position for the next 12 years, during which he and Hillary often collaborated on policy and infrastructure improvements, such as public schools and healthcare reform. In 1992, he was elected president. Throughout Bill's political career, Hillary was a full partner at her law firm and sometimes served as a political advisor for public health initiatives, education issues, children's rights and women's rights. After serving two terms as US president, Bill's career finally took a backseat to Hillary's ambitions. In 1999, the campaign for her ultimately successful 2000 New York Senate bid began. This shift in who held public power established the Clintons as professional equals. Even more significantly, the balance of power in their marriage remained the same, demonstrating their marriage was a genuinely equal intellectual and emotional partnership.

Despite the Clintons' reputation as an unbreakable power couple, the sordid underside of their relationship and fishy business undertakings were sometimes in the spotlight. Hillary's solidarity with Bill during the media blitzes surrounding early 1990s infidelity accusations, specifically the Gennifer Flowers scandal, was encapsulated by the phrase "stand by your man," which Hillary evoked during a campaign interview. She claimed that she was, in fact, standing by her man but not like "some little woman" who was submissive or feeble. The concept of "standing by your man" was used to frame

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<sup>89</sup> Debra Rosenberg and Michael Hirsh, "Chelsea's New Morning," *Newsweek*, April 3, 2000.

Hillary's continual solidarity as a noble reaction to turmoil in marriage and a representation of her contribution to the symbiotic Clinton dynamic. However, accusations of infidelity, no matter how egregious or vehemently denied, may have stuck to the president's image and added to the enduring image of sleaziness or sordidness. A well-publicized and suspiciously lucrative future trades deal involving cattle and the infamous Whitewater real estate development scandal also received negative news media attention. The Clintons were eventually cleared of wrongdoing in both investment deals, but their business partners were convicted on various charges (and later pardoned by President Clinton). Despite the Clintons' innocence, the Whitewater episode called into question Bill's integrity, true ambitions, choices of friends and contributed to an image of the president as bright and talented but also underhanded or devious.

Barack Obama was born in Hawaii in 1961, near the end of the period that is typically considered the Baby Boom. His mother was a white American anthropologist, and his father was a black Kenyan economist, absent for all but a few visits during his son's childhood. Obama's parents met as students at the University of Hawaii in 1960, and they divorced in 1964 as they pursued their educations at different institutions, she at the University of Hawaii and he at Harvard University. Barack lived in Jakarta, Indonesia for a few early years after his mother re-married an Indonesian exchange student. At age 10, Obama chose to live with his grandmother in Hawaii for the rest of his youth. His mother lived with Obama's half-sister and stepfather in Indonesia and other locations. Around this age, Barack saw his father for the last time before the elder Obama moved back to Kenya to begin his career.

After attending Occidental College and earning degrees from Columbia University and Harvard Law School, Obama met Michelle Robinson when she was assigned to be his mentor at a prestigious Chicago law firm in 1989. By then both were up and coming attorneys in urban Chicago and worked as community organizers. Robinson grew up on the South Side of Chicago in a close-knit working class household. She later attended Princeton University and graduated from Harvard Law School in 1988. They married in 1992 and had two daughters in 1998 (Malia) and 2001 (Sasha). Before the Obamas found themselves in the political spotlight, Michelle was a “hard-charging lawyer, hospital administrator, and corporate board member.”<sup>90</sup> She was known to have an almost military style that was “brisk, often stone-faced (even when making jokes), mordant.”<sup>91</sup> Her image was that of an “iconoclast,” much like Hillary Clinton, because she did not subscribe to the norms of the political wife, one who was “nonworking, white, and pious about the democratic process.”<sup>92</sup>

Obama was an Illinois State Senator for eight years before running a successful campaign in 2004 for the vacant Illinois Senate seat. In 2008, he won the presidency and, a major factor of his appeal was his attractive, successful family. Questions about his political inexperience (he had been a Senator for only three years during the campaign) were quashed by news representations of him and his family as young, vibrant and inspiring. The family maintained an image as closely tied to their Hyde Park neighborhood in Chicago, despite moving to an upscale neighborhood nearby in the early 2000s and into the White House after the election. This urban image and stories set in

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<sup>90</sup> Michelle Cottle, “The Real Running Mates: What candidates’ wives want. What we demand of them,” *Newsweek*, May 23, 2011.

<sup>91</sup> Lauren Collins, “The Other Obama,” *The New Yorker*, March 10, 2008.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

their time as young professionals in a major city would serve during campaign cycles as a non-threatening way to reinforce the Obama and his family's blackness.

### *The Clinton Marriage*

The Clintons were a modern, albeit unusually efficacious, power couple whose marriage embodied ideal Baby Boomer gender roles. As the cool, steely and reserved foil to Bill's warm, empathetic and jolly political persona, Hillary's no-nonsense persona bolstered Bill's political image as a male candidate who displayed more qualities of the feminine style of politics than his wife. Hillary's unbridled confidence and rational, unemotional rhetoric amplified Bill's warmth and sentimentality and also "closed off concerns about Bill's weaknesses."<sup>93</sup> Clinton's marriage was therefore a demonstration of his sociable and compassionate masculinity, magnified by his wife's somewhat unemotional or restrained public personality.

As a presidential wife with an impressive professional resume and, in the president's second term, political ambition, Hillary was a symbol of a new breed of political wife. They vocally declared themselves equals in private life, as many opportunist politicians would, but the Clintons were also the first couple in the White House to publically demonstrate they were on equal footing *professionally*. They built individual careers, together, by defying expectations about how men and women should act in public. The president's wife's image as an ambitious and successful career woman accentuated Bill's support for Baby Boomer ideals such as marital and gender equality.

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<sup>93</sup> Muir and Taylor, 8.

President Clinton's demonstration of Baby Boomer masculinity was textured and defined by his wife's apparent forthrightness and professional agency. Clinton's image as an embodiment of the ideals of a contemporary masculinity that valued marital equality and autonomy was reinforced by his wife's unprecedented professional success and her forthright personality. The Clintons' symbiosis and unqualified dedication to each other were presented as admirable qualities of a Baby Boomer marriage. However, there was an unshakeable quality of scheming or co-conspiring about them that became more and more evident over the years. Their sometimes-ambiguous marriage, illustrated by Bill's philandering or seediness and Hillary's constant forgiveness of or ambivalence toward his foibles, as well as their zealous dedication to Chelsea, might have been seen as signs of the changing times or a result of the relaxing of American culture and values. The image of the Clintons' marriage as consistently intact, even when the "Lewinsky tempest" hit, worked to depict Clinton as in control of his self-presentation. The fact of his marital infidelity underscored much of the news coverage late in his second term, but the couple's indomitability was often used as evidence of the Clinton's love, dedication and control over the news media's access to their private sphere.

### *Clinton Family Dynamics*

An informal but especially revealing scene from Clinton family history, reported in the context of the Lewinsky scandal but set in 1997 before the tumult began, illustrates the interpersonal relationships and persisting themes at work within news discourse that illustrated the Clinton family dynamic. *People* magazine constructed a scene at a mother-

daughter banquet at Chelsea's high school.<sup>94</sup> Hillary got onto a stage donning a tutu and other ballet garb. The First Lady, usually conceived of as regal or stately or even icy, put up her hair and let down her political veneer to play the fool in order to connect with and please Chelsea in a sensible, fun and family-oriented manner. Hillary and another mother playacted like their daughters, mocking their daughters with pouts and "mock teenage angst." Hillary, as Chelsea, whined to the other mother playing her own daughter: "Your mother embarrasses you in front of maybe a couple hundred people. My mother embarrasses me in front of millions."<sup>95</sup>

The Clintons were usually presented as very capable parents who would do anything for their daughter. Hillary, in this scene, lampooned her own public image to make Chelsea appear like any other girl in her class. Hillary's willingness to look preposterous in front of a crowd for her daughter's sake demonstrated her devotion to raising Chelsea with a sense of normalcy and family values. If Bill had been on the stage schmoozing the crowd or telling jokes, the scene would have been less striking, because even though he was the sitting US president, he was generally seen as an empathetic storyteller who could make or take a joke and loved to be the center of attention.<sup>96</sup> What makes this scene so salient is that Hillary is positioned as the benevolent, goofy, embarrassing parent in the spotlight while Bill is out of the picture. By detailing and exaggerating the Clintons' switch in parental roles after the Lewinsky scandal (disciplinarian versus comrade, source of strength versus source of ridicule), the scene reinforced the image of the couple as forceful, adaptable, complementary counterparts.

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<sup>94</sup> Susan Schindehette, "The Ties That Bind," *People*, February 15, 1999.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Muir and Taylor, 17.

Each could succeed where the other failed, even when circumstances of their political power or image dramatically changed.

Also notable was Bill's absence from this and other scenes of playful family life in the immediate aftermath of the scandal. In narratives from this period, Hillary and Chelsea were presented as already close comrades who became even closer after Bill betrayed them. They still loved and respected him, but they found emotional solace together while Bill was imagined as working through his issues alone, elsewhere (at work, with spiritual leaders, on lonely beaches, etc.)<sup>97</sup> This all-encapsulating scene exemplifies the Clinton family dynamic, one that often saw shifts in power, both marital and political, and always appeared laser-focused on protecting and fostering Chelsea's personal life at all costs. Chelsea's lack of a public persona, her image as "the White House's untroubled teen"<sup>98</sup> or her general absence from news media reports and events, suggested the Clintons had strong family values.

### *Clinton as Father*

Clinton was generally seen as having done a thorough job of protecting Chelsea's privacy, even if he sometimes "exploited the fact of her existence"<sup>99</sup> when it was convenient to employ her image as a peace broker or "bridge" between him and Hillary.<sup>100</sup> The level of access news media had to Chelsea was limited to non-existent. Although reporters were sometimes around to document Chelsea and the family on vacation or at political events, the press was forbidden to publish quotations from her or

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<sup>97</sup> Susan Schindehette, "The Ties That Bind"; Jason Zengerle, "Family Therapy," *The New Republic*, September 14, 1998.

<sup>98</sup> Margaret Carlson, "The White House's Untroubled Teen," *Time*, September 2, 1996.

<sup>99</sup> Charles Lane, "Cover Girl," *The New Republic*, March 1, 1999.

<sup>100</sup> Debra Rosenberg and Michael Hirsh, "Chelsea's New Morning"; Jason Zengerle, "Family Therapy."



pictures of her.<sup>101</sup> Reports of Clinton rebuffing interview requests and shielding her privacy may have been, on the surface, journalist's laments, but Clinton's apparently fierce (and sometimes "zealous" or "ferocious"<sup>102</sup>) protection of his daughter ultimately positioned him as a good parent. Clinton was remarkable for this embodiment of the Nurturant-parenting model that stressed mutual love and respect, joint decision-making, commitment, and responsibility to the biological family as well the larger community.<sup>103</sup> Much of this demonstration of the Nurturant-parent model grew out of a popular idea that Clinton was the "first sensitive male chief executive," as *Time* referred to him.<sup>104</sup> Clinton was a living embodiment of New Age values and therapy culture's effect on men coming of age when the "rhetoric of pop psychology and self-actualization"<sup>105</sup> was pervasive.

News media portrayed Chelsea as a symbol or a prop in Clinton's performance of masculinity and Nurturant-parent patriarchy. Reports of the first daughter's list of chores and domestic responsibilities in *People* and *Newsweek*, for example, created familiar images of domesticity that readers and voters could relate to.<sup>106</sup> By reporting that Bill or Hillary would diligently check-in with Chelsea to ensure her homework was completed and her bedroom was clean, news media carefully constructed the Clintons as "normal" Baby Boomer parents who fostered strength, self-discipline, joy and purpose in their child's life by promoting work and contribution to the family or community.<sup>107</sup> Scenes of domesticity and patriarchy were not performances of familial domination so much as performances of normalcy or middle-class domesticity. Clinton discussing Chelsea's

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<sup>101</sup> Rosenberg and Hirsh, "Chelsea's New Morning."

<sup>102</sup> James Bennet, "As the Clintons Speak, Chelsea Plays a Silent and Powerful Political Role," *New York Times*, August 29, 1996.

<sup>103</sup> Lakoff, 215.

<sup>104</sup> Howard Fineman, "The New Age President," *Time*, January 25, 1993.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Susan Schindehette, "The Ties That Bind"; Rosenberg and Hirsh, "Chelsea's New Morning."

<sup>107</sup> Lakoff, *Moral Politics*.

tonsillectomy or his frequent references to her birth rhetorically aligned him with average male voters who were fathers and could relate to these simple sentiments.<sup>108</sup>

Whenever Clinton evoked Chelsea and raved about her youth, her “values and maturity,” he was presenting himself as a successful masculine patriarch who could also successfully steward the country.<sup>109</sup> Chelsea’s maturity, intellect and all around goodness were regarded by news media as Clinton’s maturity and goodness.<sup>110</sup>

Clinton’s performance of this patriarchal masculinity, although clearly adhering to a masculine ideology that valued sexual or physical virility over all else, contributed to his image as a tender, caring, more relaxed patriarch for his daughter as well as the country.<sup>111</sup> Clinton’s careful and successful handling of Chelsea’s media presence and her overall image as an unusually precocious young person was a symbol of the progress and achievements that the president had the potential to accomplish in his professional life. His control over Chelsea’s public presence also reinforced his Baby Boomer ‘new man’ masculinity that loved and protected his children without the detachedness or dominance that the previous generations of fathers often exhibited.

### *The Obama Marriage*

The nuclear Obama family evoked images of the 1950s American Dream as a humble but high-achieving, two-child household. The Obamas’ twist on the American Dream was their blackness, freshness of spirit and backgrounds as city dwellers and

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<sup>108</sup> James Bennet, “As the Clintons Speak.”

<sup>109</sup> Adam Nagourney, “Crowds Seeking Clintons put Spotlight on Chelsea,” *New York Times*, September 1, 1999.

<sup>110</sup> Rosenberg and Hirsh, “Chelsea’s New Morning.”

<sup>111</sup> Bennet, “As Clintons Speak.”

community organizers, which saved their brand from seeming outdated. The family's rise to prominence in urban Chicago was evocative of a historical moment in which younger Baby Boomers and Generation X-ers were making self-conscious decisions to raise families in major cities in a backlash against their parents' postwar flights to the suburbs. These tensions between urban and suburban, radical and new versus traditional and quaint, continually surfaced in news media narratives featuring Obama's family. Obama's campaign focused on change and the future, and the family's blackness was an indication that American demographics and power structures were beginning to transform.

As the head of the first black presidential family, Obama was an object of cultural fascination for news media. Obama's image as the "new black role model"<sup>112</sup> elicited comparisons to other prominent black males, usually athletes or actors. Most strikingly, *NPR*, *The New York Times* and *Time* all directly compared Obama to rap artist 50 Cent. The rapper was postured as the embodiment of contemporary black masculinity or the representative of the real black America, and Obama was supposedly eclipsing him as the symbol of a modern black masculinity.<sup>113</sup> In contrast to 50 Cent's masculine physicality that relied on the "his ability to intimidate, his ability to control, his ability to exploit women... his raw assertion of power,"<sup>114</sup> Obama's strengths were all internal: his intellect, his powers of rhetoric and communication, his ability to "instill hope and belief in people."<sup>115</sup> This contrast between 50 Cent's physical masculinity and Obama's cerebral masculinity was largely used as a way to highlight the family's uniqueness as

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<sup>112</sup> Neal Conan, "Is Barack Obama the New Black Role Model?" *NPR Talk of the Nation*, February 2, 2009.

<sup>113</sup> Ta-Nehisi Paul Coates, "Is Obama Black Enough?" *Time*, February 1, 2007.

<sup>114</sup> David Brooks, "Combat and Composure," *New York Times*, May 6, 2008.

<sup>115</sup> Jack Lyden, "Black Masculinity."

exceptional black public figures and to signal the new political epoch that was approaching, particularly in a media culture in which the pervading images of black men were limited to hip-hop artists, Michael Vick, “broken families and perp walks, AKs and Cristal.”<sup>116</sup>

As the first black First Lady, Michelle was also viewed as a mesmerizing part of the Obama media spectacle. *The New Republic* and *The New Yorker* in particular saw her as a “dramatic rejection” of the “Stepford”<sup>117</sup> women who had come before the Obamas. She was a modern iteration of the political wife as “interloper”<sup>118</sup> image and was seen as trying to act as “co-president.”<sup>119</sup> These labels were pejorative, not celebratory. Her unprecedented “sarcasm, candor, the compulsion to ignore the cardinal rule of political wifedom by portraying her husband as something less than God-made-flesh” was sometimes seen as emasculating Obama.<sup>120</sup> Obama was already an effete-seeming president who was well known for his feminine style of politics, and *Newsweek* suggested his wife’s outspokenness and forthrightness sometimes highlighted or exaggerated these qualities.<sup>121</sup>

The Obamas were mainly portrayed in news media as a dynamic duo who complemented each other, best exemplified by their public demonstrations of intimacy and partnership such as their infamous fist bumps. The fist bumps in particular became fodder for celebration of the couple’s hip, dynamic partnership. Implicit in the fist bump gesture and the unplanned ease with which the couple appeared to do it was Obama’s

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<sup>116</sup> James Poniewozik, “Meet the Obamas!” *Time*, December 1, 2008.

<sup>117</sup> Michelle Cottle, “Wife Lessons,” *The New Republic*, March 26, 2008.

<sup>118</sup> Lisa Burns, *First Ladies and the Fourth Estate: Press Framing of Presidential Wives*, (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).

<sup>119</sup> Michelle Cottle, “Wife Lessons.”

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, “Wife Lessons.”

<sup>121</sup> Rebecca Walker, “The Making of a Man,” *Newsweek*, January 27, 2009; Raina Kelley, “A Real Wife, in a Real Marriage,” *Newsweek*, February 25, 2008.

“brothercool image,” his comfort with the “concrete trappings of black culture”<sup>122</sup> and an “intimate, tasteful expression of the Obamas’ excitement and mutual affection.”<sup>123</sup>

Although Michelle did not practice law or work outside her role as First Lady, the fact of her former careers in law, public service and university administration contributed to Barack’s image as a Baby Boomer husband who had no qualms about having a wife who was a professional equal. The fist bumps and Obama’s frequent admissions that his wife was the family’s emotional leader indicated they were not only intellectual or professional equals, but Michelle might even have been the more traditionally masculine or dominant partner in the marriage. This stylish, complementary partnership was well regarded in news media, but news narratives that went beneath the surface sometimes revealed tensions in the relationship. Michelle was sometimes seen as outspoken, lacking candor and undermining Obama’s masculine credibility with her revealing statements about their personal dynamic. Although she was sometimes used as a device for framing Obama as too effete for the presidency, narratives about Obama’s wife ultimately helped his image.

The strength of Obama’s image as a masculine black father figure was located in his authenticity as a “real” black man, even if his racial credentials were legitimized by stereotypes of black men and fathers as well as his wife. Even when the president’s cultural or racial authenticity was called into question, his wife’s irrefutable connections to black culture re-legitimated Obama’s blackness. Having two working parents was a critical component of this black family identity. As Raina Kelley pointed out in *Newsweek*, black women have historically “never been burdened with the luxury of

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<sup>122</sup> Michelle Cottle, “The Cool Presidency,” *The New Republic*, March 3, 2009.

<sup>123</sup> Dayo Olopade, “Dap Politics,” *The New Republic*, June 4, 2008.

choice...never fought to labor outside the home--black women have always worked...never inherited the remorse about balancing work and family that plagues...white counterparts.”<sup>124</sup> Images of Michelle as an outspoken, authentically black working mother made “her husband seem more black”<sup>125</sup> and assuaged concerns about Obama’s ability to relate to and understand the perspectives of black voters. His image as a black family man and stand-up dad, motivated by his own absentee father, echoed an increasingly common sentiment among “new” black men. In the *New York Times*, David Brooks suggested that a generation of young men raised by single mothers saw Obama as the black father figure they never had and wanted to be for their own children.<sup>126</sup>

### *Obama Family Dynamics*

A scene from when Obama was running for Illinois senator aptly sums up the tensions and dynamics of his family life. Following a speech at a South Side Chicago church, a group of “young radicals” were protesting the event, claiming that Obama did not authentically represent the community he was trying to convince to vote for him.<sup>127</sup> The politically feminized Obama gave his speech and chatted with voters afterward. Michelle, his tough-as-nails and supposedly emasculating wife, scared off the “hoodlum thugs ready to do a full-blast demonstration” with her unexpectedly confrontational street smarts. Michelle reportedly asked the hoodlums “Y'all got a problem or something?” in

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<sup>124</sup> Kelley, “A Real Wife.”

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> David Brooks, “Combat and Composure.”

<sup>127</sup> Collins, “The Other Obama.”

such a way that “they all froze, guys who would slap the mayor, who would slap Jesse Jackson in the face, even.”<sup>128</sup>

Not only did Michelle’s “force-to-be-reckoned-with reputation” bolster her husband’s racial authenticity and cultural authority, but her image as the “Tough Broad” served as a foil to Barack’s image as a calm, positive peacemaker. In this scene, Michelle’s handling of the youths established her authenticity as an urbanite well versed in the language of inner city streets.<sup>129</sup> The scene legitimated, by proxy, Obama’s deep connections to signifiers of authentic blackness even if they were his wife’s connections. The relationships with former Black Panthers who were at the scene, the setting in a predominantly black urban church and the fearlessness with which she handled the radical youths were all cultivated through Michelle’s experiences or connections, not Obama’s personal experience.

The Obama girls were not present in this scene and were in general rarely seen and never heard. Their role was to be photographed, primly dressed, mature and confident, to be symbols of their father’s image as a “guardian of young womanhood.”<sup>130</sup> The underlying themes in the church scene (Obama as feminized patriarchal figure, Michelle as authenticator of Barack’s blackness and the daughters’ absence but “fact of existence”) were all emblematic of the Obama family dynamic. Michelle’s active, aggressive persona in contrast to Obama’s softer, more people-centered image was symbolic of the larger dynamics of their marriage. Scenes like the church incident in which Michelle was the workhorse and Obama was the cerebral visionary defined their partnership and political brand.

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<sup>128</sup> Cottle, “Wife Lessons.”

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Collins, “The Other Obama.”

### *Fatherhood*

News media images of Obama's school-aged daughters also served as convenient emblems of his new man masculinity. For the most part, the Obama girls were seen or spoken of and not heard, in a similar vein as Chelsea Clinton's "fact of existence." The daughters were used as rhetorical devices in speeches or statements to make Obama more empathetic or relatable or to remind readers the president had family values. For example, Obama reminded readers of their existence in an article about Title IX legislation in *Newsweek* and at a fundraiser in which the *New York Times* reported he was in "proud dad" mode in effort to construct a "bridge" to the people he governed.<sup>131</sup> By constructing Obama as the proud dad who bragged about his kids' achievements, even the quotidian events of a teenager's existence such as earning a driver's license or attending prom, news representations of the girls worked to make the president more relatable or even accessible.<sup>132</sup> Although the Obama girls' public appearances were limited or controlled, the fact that the president had children he cared for and took a deep personal interest in suggested his policy decisions came from a place of genuine experience or emotion.

Occasionally the girls were heard from, but it was usually unintentional. On a private family vacation to the Grand Canyon, for instance, Obama's older daughter's interactions with a tour guide were recorded and reported.<sup>133</sup> The *New York Times* made

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<sup>131</sup> Barack Obama, "Entitled to a Fair Shot," *Newsweek*, June 25, 2012; Michael D. Shear, "For First Father, Protectiveness About Daughters Gives way to Pride," *New York Times*, July 24, 2014.

<sup>132</sup> Michael D. Shear, "Protectiveness About Daughters"; Michael D. Shear, "Obama Goes to West Coast for 3 Days With Donors," *New York Times*, July 22, 2014.

<sup>133</sup> Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "On Canyon Visit, Obama Child Shows She's Done Her Homework," *New York Times*, August 16, 2009.



Malia Obama come-off as bright and intelligent, and Obama's knowing the precise topics his daughter was studying at her middle school made him seem like an especially involved father who took pride in his children's achievements. However, a scene from Obama's campaign trail neatly illustrates this blurry line between public and private that often complicates how Baby Boomer presidents handled news media access to the family. After allowing the girls to appear on an evening talk show for the first time, he announced on a second talk show that he regretted letting the news media get to them, and the veil of the presidential performance was lifted, however briefly.<sup>134</sup>

In one version of events, Obama's daughters were generally charming testaments to their father's Nurturant-parenting involvedness. Obama was seen as trying to gain "dad cred" with voters, as Maureen Dowd put it, "both as a potentially strong dad for the country and as a good dad to his daughters...a protective parent for America and Iraq."<sup>135</sup> The *New York Times's* narrative framed the original interview scene as a way for Obama to show off his adorable, well-spoken, mature daughters. This credibility as an involved and emotional present father was to be translated as proof that he could also cultivate a well-adjusted and respectable constituency and that he could apply these skills to fostering and building a nascent, inexperienced democracy in Iraq. His competency at raising children was the symbol for his potential for nurturing something underdeveloped and fostering personal growth in people and ultimately organizations or institutions. This narrative refrain may also have sought to convince readers that Obama's gentler version of masculinity, one tempered by soft power and kindness and empathy, was preferable to

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<sup>134</sup> Maureen Dowd, "No Ice Cream, Senator?" *New York Times*, July 12, 2008.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

George W. Bush's more traditionally masculine or coercive approach to reconstructing the country ravaged by the War on Terror.

The other, more scathing version of the interview debacle's coverage depicted Obama as making a campaign gaffe or error in judgment. *NPR*, for example, saw the incident as Obama "getting carried away" and opening the floodgates or "a Pandora's Box" for the news media and paparazzi to access the girls for interviews or for takes on their father's campaign.<sup>136</sup> He admitted to "getting carried away in the moment," and news coverage of the interview indicated that Obama clumsily let the journalists conducting the interview take over and "mic up" his daughters before he had a chance to interfere.<sup>137</sup> The accidental family interview reminded viewers that the president not only flip-flopped on a fairly important personal issue, but his self-labeled parenting misstep might reflect larger judgment issues that emphasized his relative political inexperience and lack of media savvy. Obama losing control of his narrative, particularly when it was a narrative regarding his children, was a somewhat rare public parenting mistake, and it worked as a counter-narrative to his dominant image as a benevolent, highly competent parent unafraid to put his love for his family, his "enlightened," non-normative masculinity, on display.<sup>138</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Inherent in news media coverage of Democratic Baby Boomer presidential family life was the implication that the cultural meanings of manhood and fatherhood drastically

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<sup>136</sup> Michelle Norris, "Obama in U-turn On Daughters' TV Appearance," *NPR All Things Considered*, July 9, 2008.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> Rebecca Walker, "The Making of a Man."

changed when the Clinton and Obama's generation took-on the social, cultural and political power in the late 1980s and 1990s. When Clinton was elected president in 1992, a palpable shift in how the citizens thought about and understood presidential power took place and destabilized the values and masculine ideals that had become naturalized in both in US politics and American culture at large in previous decades. Clinton and Obama were new kinds of men, ones who were deeply influenced by the progressive social movements of the 1960s that championed racial, gender and sexual diversity. The semi-constructed scenes of family life were the stories news media told about not only the presidents but also about modern American family life.

The similarities in how each presidential family came to be and how they were represented in news media were striking. Both Clinton and Obama met and courted their wives in elite institutions (such as the Clintons at Yale University) or highly skilled professional worlds (such as the Obamas at a prestigious law firm). Each of the First Ladies had an image as a "Tough Broad" who was career-driven and an intellectual equal. The First Wives became symbols of feminism's achievement in the previous decades and the presidents' New Age, New Men, outlooks on the world. Further, the changing image of US presidents as fathers first, politicians second was taking hold in news and political discourse. The American family, as a framework for understanding political power, was becoming an increasingly politicized concept. Politicians and especially presidents now had to constantly convince voters of their (and their party's) veneration and embodiment of family values. One way to express this dedication to putting families and family values first was through scenes of family life and constant mentions of happy, well-adjusted children that news media would circulate. Clinton and

later Obama publically displayed emotion, expressed love for their children and admiration for their personally and professionally equal wives. These presidents' relationships with their wives and children revealed how substantially American culture and worldviews regarding sex difference and gender display had shifted in just a generation.

### *III: Narratives of Presidential Vacations and Sports*

Historically, vacations have been understood as stretches of times in which Americans, including US presidents, were off duty and out of town. Despite early associations with health, self-improvement and rejuvenation, Cindy S. Aron writes that vacations provoked middle-class fears of the “dangers of idleness” and the “moral, spiritual, financial and political dangers” that unstructured leisure time wrought.<sup>139</sup> Even though Americans became accustomed to leisure, play, fun, organized athletics and vacation as they became integrated into the fabric of life in the second half of the nineteenth century, middle-class people’s “distrust and suspicion of idleness persisted.”<sup>140</sup> American discomfort with laziness and unproductivity endures, but news coverage has increasingly viewed presidents’ non-productive vacation and leisure time as mechanisms of political image making and the presidential performance. Although presidential leisure travel takes the men away from the White House, the presidents’ vacations kept them tethered to domestic family life. Presidents imagined to be ensconced with wives or kids in vacation environments could, however, simultaneously reinforce their images as masculine family men and men of leisure or taste.

Clinton’s travelogue included six summers in Martha’s Vineyard and two in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. The president and his family occasionally vacationed in other spots, such as upstate New York, the Virgin Islands, Hawaii and South Carolina, but the majority of leisure trips were in Martha’s Vineyard or various east coast islands. The Clinton parents’ leisure habits were largely imagined to be upscale activities like golf, sailing and glamorous parties with celebrities. Obama’s family trips were located mostly

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<sup>139</sup> Cindy S. Aron, *Working At Play: A History of Vacations in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1-5.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, 126.

in Martha's Vineyard and Hawaii and also included some stops in Chicago, Maine, the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone National Park, several western mountain towns and a trip to the Gulf Coast. The trips were usually portrayed as working vacations or family vacations. The Obamas' vacations, although somewhat expensive dream trips, were usually viewed in mainstream press as quiet family getaways.

### **Vacations: The Hedonist and the Pragmatist on Holiday**

Stories about vacations, no matter how politically powerful the traveler is or is not, are really about place and signification. Each person is an index of deeply imbued tastes, desires and principles, and each vacation destination is encoded with powerful historical, cultural, political and social connotations. Therefore, stories about a certain person traveling to a certain place are statements of a person's aesthetic values, identity politics or inner character. Consideration of how news media wrote about specific presidential vacation spaces and their cultural or political codes, the presidential body in leisure time or leisure spaces can reveal how overall presidential images, both public and private, could be transformed by the political, cultural, social or aesthetic connotations of the presidents' leisure habits.

#### *Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts*

Clinton and Obama traveled to a few of the same destinations over the years, but none received as considerable news attention as Martha's Vineyard. Although Clinton was most closely associated with the vacation spot and its unique yet fluid meanings, Obama's multiple family trips to the island also received a sizable amount of news media

coverage. However, news coverage of each president's vacation in Martha's Vineyard was thematically or metaphorically diverse and irregularly covered, making direct comparisons or generalizations somewhat tenuous. Considering why Martha's Vineyard in particular could be a potent yet malleable symbol for both presidents' inner characters is key for understanding the influence of vacation environments and their frequently changing aesthetics or connotations on presidential image. The scenes in which Martha's Vineyard took-on a new meaning or image was just as important as the scenes in which long-held reputations of the island or the presidents were reinforced.

The most common narrative that surfaced in news coverage of Clinton's vacations in Martha's Vineyard focused on the hedonistic and indulgent aspects of his travel and relaxation. Most of the *New York Times*' extensive coverage of Clinton's trips to Martha's Vineyard saw the location as a site of constant parties, drinking and eating and fraternizing with the rich and famous.<sup>141</sup> *Newsweek* suggested his vacation was a weak excuse for socializing with actors, musicians, politicians and investors and for attending a "\$25,000-a-plate dinner," a "\$5,000-a-pop cocktail gathering," and "posh" golf courses which exposed how "thrall he is to his deep-pocket donors."<sup>142</sup> The image of Clinton was as a member of the jet set, partying and socializing with America's east coast elite. The "impossibly glamorous" trips to the Hamptons were colored as opportunities for Clinton to establish a presence among potential benefactors and celebrities with deep pockets and national stages. Stories following this narrative thread contributed to the image of President Clinton an elitist or, more cynically, a shallow parvenu whose personality and value system were fundamentally changed by newfound money and status.

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<sup>141</sup> James Bennet, "On Vacation, the Parties, and Faces, are Constant," *New York Times*, August 31, 1997.

<sup>142</sup> Michael M. Thomas, "Hanging in the Hamptons."

Narratives of Clinton's trips almost always presented the vacation destination and the activities as similarly scheming or somehow politically calculated. By the end of Clinton's presidency, Martha's Vineyard and all its associations with secluded homes, rich friends, celebrities and lavish dinners were "familiar props in the summer showcase of the Clinton marriage."<sup>143</sup> News media such as *Time*, *Newsweek* and frequent *New York Times* presidential reporters Todd Purdum and Katharine Q. Seelye viewed Clinton's spot in the upper class and as a social butterfly with deep ties to the rich and famous as passé. After six or so trips to Martha's Vineyard and the Hamptons, *NYT* referred to the Clintons as "serial socializers"<sup>144</sup> and *Newsweek* depicted them as more "full members of the smart set than celebrity interlopers" notorious for late-night partying.<sup>145</sup> The perpetual images of the Clintons spending their free time in New York contributed to their naturalization as authentic New Yorkers, rather than Arkansans or Washingtonians.

This public transformation was facilitated through news media's stories and images of the family's private leisure time in small towns in New York and contributed to a re-imagination of the Clintons' histories and state loyalties.<sup>146</sup> The makeover of the Clintons demonstrates that political images can be influenced by news discourse and images, but this transformation is also crucial because it exposed that presidential vacation spots and their cultural or aesthetic meanings could also be reimagined and recycled.

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<sup>143</sup> Katharine Q. Seelye, "For Vacationing Clintons, a Flavor of Old Times," *New York Times*, August 22, 1999.

<sup>144</sup> Bennet, "On Vacation."

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> Seelye, "Clinton's Limit New York Vacation Plans in Election Calculation," *New York Times*, July 24, 1999.



The first post-scandal trip to Martha's Vineyard was cast not as the usual hedonism-fueled indulgence, or even as a fun family trip. This particular trip to Martha's Vineyard was reimagined by *Time* and the *New York Times* as a desperate presidential escape, a 'self-imposed cocoon,' a place where Clinton could lick his wounds and heal whatever emotional damages he and the family were suffering. In the midst of Clinton's major sex scandal, news media used phrases such as "pained confession," "healing process," "survive the tempest," "island escape," "wrenching experience," "somber" and "repair work" to describe Clinton as he traveled and took a vacation in Martha's Vineyard (during which he played a "therapeutic round of golf").<sup>147</sup> The trip to Martha's Vineyard with his family was portrayed as the first step in a process of reparation, as well a symbolic gesture that re-coded Clinton's favorite vacation spot, and all its usual social and political connotations, as a site of psychological healing.

A famous image from this period showed Chelsea holding hands with her mother and father as they board the airplane for Martha's Vineyard a few days after the president's admission of infidelity. Their backs were facing the camera, indicating privacy and solidarity. Chelsea's position in the middle of her parents was viewed as symbolic of her role as the "bridge" that had and continued to connect the Clinton parents. The addition of Buddy the dog in the image completes the message that the Clinton family was still a wholesome American family going on a wholesome American family vacation, despite the well-known familial turmoil they were going to the Vineyard to deal with. Until this point, the iconic representation of Clinton in Martha's Vineyard

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<sup>147</sup> Katharine Q. Seelye, "Clintons Put a Public Face on Their Family Vacation," *New York Times*, August 26, 1998; John M. Broder, "Reporter's Notebook; the Faces of Clinton: Weary to Somber to Vibrant," *New York Times*, September 5, 1998; James Carney and Karen Tumulty, "Stormy Weather," *Time*, September 7, 1998.

had been of him aboard a sailboat with Ted Kennedy and friends, not of him boarding a plane with his wife and daughter for intense family therapy. The undertaking of a presidential vacation had in itself become an act of escape, retreat or an admission weakness and exhaustion rather than an act of lavishness, leisure or consumerism.

Martha's Vineyard, already reimagined multiple times, took on totally new meanings when Obama took office and travelled there. The island went from a hedonic elitist sanctuary for Clinton to sensible family getaway for the Obamas. When Obama visited the island, news media went to great pains to describe its more populist side such as the plentiful farmers' markets, local seafood, picturesque restaurants and naturalistic activities like swimming, hiking and fishing. The coverage often emphasized the more middle-class activities (mini-golf, water parks, nature walks) or discussed logistical concerns (security, traffic jams, cell phone service). Described as "pretty much like the rest of us"<sup>148</sup> and a "little-seen visitor,"<sup>149</sup> Obama's trips to the elitist Martha's Vineyard were re-envisioned as quaint trips to an old fishing village during which he tried to appear natural and not cause a spectacle like Clinton did.

Obama's trips to the Vineyard were further reimagined, normalized and downplayed in racial terms. Because Martha's Vineyard and the east coast islands and towns in general are viewed as affluent white enclaves, or, as *Time* scathingly put it, as bebies of "well-heeled, sunburned Caucasians swarming its beaches and boardwalks in Top-Siders and pastel shorts,"<sup>150</sup> voters may have taken issue with the potentially controversial symbolic associations Obama was creating by choosing this location. However, news media sought to legitimize the trip by naming other prominent black

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<sup>148</sup> "How President Take Vacation," *Time*, August 8, 2014.

<sup>149</sup> Jeff Zeleny, "One Little-Seen Visitor is Talk of the Vineyard," *New York Times*, August 25, 2009.

<sup>150</sup> Tim Rogers, "Postcard: Oak Bluffs," *Time*, August 24, 2009.

scholars and politicians who lived or vacationed there. Henry Louis Gates, for example, described Martha's Vineyard as a "racial heaven" and the "most integrated community" he'd ever experienced.<sup>151</sup> Other prominent black figures who regularly vacationed here, such as writer Dorothy West and former Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, worked to code Oak Bluffs and, synecdochically, Martha's Vineyard, as "an island of rich diversity and harmonious race relations."<sup>152</sup> This reconfiguration of the island's historical image minimized the oddness of the black president's presence in a historically white elite social space. News media's occasional re-imaginings of Martha's Vineyard paved the way for this most recent iteration of the island as a racial and social haven and demonstrates that not only can specific vacation spots take-on new meanings, but the act of a president taking a vacation can in itself come to connote new or different meanings.

### *Hawaii*

Unlike Martha's Vineyard, the coverage of presidential Hawaiian vacations was mostly one-sided. Clinton took at least two trips there during his presidency, but news coverage of his and his family's leisure time was remarkably limited. Clinton's time in the tropical paradise was, in one instance, cut short by flooding in the Midwest that he had to address, or was depicted as uneventful, during a different rain-soaked week he vacationed there in 1993.<sup>153</sup> Michael Duffy's *Newsweek* article about a trip to Hawaii mentions Hillary relaxing on a scenic beach while Bill and Chelsea play in the ocean,

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Tim Rogers, "Postcard."

<sup>153</sup> Peter Baker, "For Clinton, a Soggy Hawaiian Holiday," *The Washington Post*, November 18, 1996; Eleanor Clift, "On the levee: a flood of politicians," *Newsweek*, July 26, 1993; Michael Duffy, "Policy Wonks in Paradise," *Time*, July 26, 1993.

which provides a nice snapshot of vacation and family life intertwining, but this instance is one of the few times Clinton was situated as truly vacationing or not working in Hawaii.<sup>154</sup> The reason for the lack of descriptive or comprehensive news accounts of the Clintons in Hawaii is unclear. If anything, its absence perhaps suggests that Hawaii simply was not one of Clinton's vacation spots of choice and perhaps did not warrant the meaningful news coverage other vacation locations received or that Hawaii received when it became a destination of choice for Obama.

Many of Obama's vacations in Hawaii, his favorite vacation spot and his home state, were framed as homecomings or ways to ensconce the president in a gentle, familiar environment. *New York Times* coverage of Obama's homecomings focused on the breezy beauty of the island, the old friends the president visited, the foods that Obama grew up eating like plate lunches and shaved ice and the "refuge" or "sanctuary" qualities of the isolated state.<sup>155</sup> Visits to Hawaii were viewed as private time to re-connect to his roots, family and friends and to re-establish credibility with voters in his native state in a natural or non-conspicuous way.

Hawaii was also the site where the Obama family was seen engaging in middle-class family fun. Whether he and his daughters were visiting Obama's grandmother, snorkeling, playing on the beach or swimming with dolphins at the zoo, Obama's vacation in Hawaii was presented as a family-centric getaway in which the kids' private fun and interests were his foremost concerns.<sup>156</sup> The president also took his daughters to a

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<sup>154</sup> Michael Duffy, "Policy Wonks."

<sup>155</sup> Ashley Parker, "For Obama, a Real and Rare Vacation," *New York Times*, January 5, 2014; Jackie Calmes, "Visits With School Pals Are a Touchstone on President's trips to Hawaii," *New York Times*, January 3, 2014.

<sup>156</sup> Ashley Parker, "A Real and Rare Vacation"; Michael Falcone, "Obama: At Home in the Islands," *New York Times*, August, 10, 2008; Jackie Calmes, "A Water Park, but No Pool."

waterpark after he “ditched his ‘press pool’ of media minders,” indicating that even on a private vacation, Obama had to seek out privacy for his family.<sup>157</sup> The destination, though upscale and extravagant, may have been aligned with middle-class values or aspirations and therefore did not raise as many concerns about expense or grandeur as other destinations did for presidential vacations in the past. Hawaii, as a consumer or aesthetic choice, might have been more relatable or imaginable for average or middle-class voters in a way that was inconceivable for famously upscale vacations destinations.

Embedded in these narratives of Obama in his natural or native setting were meditations on the president’s racial and cultural identities and the associations that certain regions and ethnicities once held in popular imagination. Although his father was from Kenya, Obama was a multiracial American citizen who was born in Hawaii. Africa, and Kenya in particular, carried associations with pastoralism and conjured images of sweeping green vistas “free from human agency.”<sup>158</sup> Similar to African nations, Hawaii was seen as exotic and unadulterated and its people primitive, romantic and sensual.<sup>159</sup> Hawaiian visitors, particularly in the post-World War II period, were imagined as tourists in an unfamiliar, faraway but still tangentially American vacation destination.<sup>160</sup> By demonstrating that Obama was not a visitor or a tourist in Hawaii, that he was at home in paradise or an exotic vacationland, news media situated the president as ethnically and culturally oppositional to mainland Americans. Obama’s ease and familiarity with Hawaiian culture and topography were further accentuated when he vacationed in

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<sup>157</sup> Jackie Calmes, “A Water Park, but No Pool,” *New York Times*, December 26, 2008.

<sup>158</sup> Bruner, *Culture on Tour*, 36.

<sup>159</sup> Farber and Bailey, “The Fighting Man as Tourist.”

<sup>160</sup> Orvar Löfgren, *On Holiday: A History of Vacationing*, 215-217; David Farber and Beth Bailey, “The Fighting Man as Tourist: The Politics of Tourist Culture in Hawaii During World War II,” *The Pacific Historical Review* 65.4 (1996), 649.

environments with which he had no obvious political, social or personal connections. Conceptions of Obama as this sensual “Other” raised in beautiful but uncultivated Hawaii, working as a lawyer and raising a young family in urban Chicago and fulfilling presidential duties in refined and feminized Washington DC complicated the president’s cultural identity and image. Despite Obama’s intricate multiculturalism, news media did not have a conceptual or narrative framework to work with when the president ventured in the wilderness of the American west. Because Obama displayed a complex, often contradictory set of sociocultural affiliations and masculine traits, he did not fit seamlessly into nature or wilderness narratives as easily as past presidents, including Clinton to some extent, did.

### *The Wild West and Mountain Towns*

Western states, according to William Philpott, are associated with “scenic beauty, fresh air, green open space...escape from city stresses and the workaday world.”<sup>161</sup> This romantic image of mountain and canyon states has solidified the region in popular consciousness as a place where people go for recreation, leisure, regeneration or reclamation of their wild or natural selves.<sup>162</sup> Descriptions of presidents in these settings placed them out of context or out of their elements and emphasized the unnaturalness of a high-powered politician in a pastoral setting.

The western mountain states’ image is fraught with a tension between the self-purifying reverence of the wild space and the overly refined, overwhelmed “anti-urban”

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<sup>161</sup> William Philpott, *Vacationland: Tourism and Environment in the Colorado High Country* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 6.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

city dweller who seeks the region's regenerative powers. The west has been seen historically as a place where pitting "the masculine body against the rugged outdoors would strengthen character and purify the soul."<sup>163</sup> This rhetoric positioned the east coast (refined, cultivated, cultured, feminized in taste) in direct contrast to the west (untamed, wild, isolated, masculine). Cultured men who work in east coast governmental business and finance centers, such as the US presidents in Washington D.C., might be imagined as too refined or sophisticated and in need of spiritual regeneration and re-masculinization. The tranquil mountains of Wyoming served as a place of respite from the social, political and financial turmoil in Washington. Presidents were imagined as needing to get away or escape from the rigors of an unusually intense day job.

When Clinton took a 17-day vacation in the Tetons, he "arrived today in this cool, clean, cloudless valley where moose are moose, mountains are mountains and the word that goes naturally with white water is rafting, not hearing," as Todd Purdum illustrated in the *New York Times*.<sup>164</sup> By pointing out his political and financial troubles, the pleasant descriptions of the natural beauty of Wyoming placed Clinton in direct contrast to the locale. The quiet and isolated location also presented Clinton as someone in need of alone time or personal time for rest and regeneration.

Another trip to Jackson Hole, Wyoming was also used as an opportunity to discuss Clinton's need for complete spiritual regeneration. One aide told Purdum that Clinton is "going to be on vacation; he's not going to pretend otherwise," and Clinton had also expressed how tired he was to reporters by saying that he looked forward to simply

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid, 140-142.

<sup>164</sup> Todd Purdum, "Tired Clinton in Tetons for 17-Day Vacation," *New York Times*, August 16, 1995.

lying down and just trying to rest.<sup>165</sup> The simple human need for sleep and the fact Clinton could not get this in Washington implied a private presidential fatigue that could not be healed without a vacation, an extended escape from the daily pressures of presidential life. The president could only heal and emotionally recuperate in a rustic, wild, secluded and highly masculine setting like the mountainous west. For Clinton, the west was raw and open, distinctly lacking in power lunches, bodyguards and other signifiers of political or cultural refinement. Whatever minimalist, pastoral images of untamed wilderness that Jackson Hole may conjure and may indeed accurately capture, the tourist site is packed with luxury lodges, upscale shops and other signifiers of comfort and refinement. The reality of the town's affluence makes it largely unattainable for middle-class voters and somewhat at odds with the region's image as a masculine regenerative location.<sup>166</sup> Still, the president admitting he's tired, overworked and anything less than constant pillar of strength was striking. Presidential vacations were certainly nothing new in the late 1990s, but that Clinton felt able to express his own exhaustion, need for healing and desire to re-capture his vitality in the American west was notable.

When Clinton went camping in the Adirondacks in rural upstate New York or Jackson Hole, news media speculated that his advisors had picked-up on the fact that "swing voters like camping, hiking and fishing,"<sup>167</sup> and questioned the president's motives for visiting. News reporters accused Clinton of blatantly trying to appeal to

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<sup>165</sup> Todd Purdum, "Tired Clinton."

<sup>166</sup> Jackson Hole's actual function as a western playground for eastern elites is best illustrated by the Economic Policy Symposium held there each year. Each year, thousands of bankers, economists, academics and Federal Reserve officials flock to the mountain town for a conference dedicated to global economics discussion by day and luxurious accommodations and activities by night.

<sup>167</sup> Katharine Seeyle, "Vacations Spots in New York Suddenly Appeal to Clintons," *New York Times*, May 22, 1999.



middle-class voters and trying “to please environmentalists.”<sup>168</sup> His attempts at nature sports like rafting and hiking were seen as lame, transparent and indicative of his real, “weekend warrior” self.<sup>169</sup> This discourse is reminiscent of the criticism surrounding Clinton’s trips to Martha’s Vineyard, which were similarly conceived of as politically transparent or suggestive of upscale or elite interests. Grafting this already established frame of Clinton as dishonest or calculating onto upstate New York narratives was one way news media tried to understand the president’s sudden interest in more naturalistic or rustic vacation environments.

The *New York Times* also suggested Clinton was trying to hone his image to fit the concept of “the strenuous life” which includes pictures or images of presidents looking physically fit, virile, athletic and capable.<sup>170</sup> In this way, Clinton appeared to consciously try to sharpen his own image and align himself with rural or outdoors hobbies and interests, much in the way past presidents tried to project this idealized version of themselves by clearing brush on secluded ranches or invoking their familiarity with farm life.<sup>171</sup> News media was critical of this fakery, but Clinton was still discursively connected to nature and re-masculinized when he was in natural settings. So although *Time* and other outlets were well aware that Clinton was prone to “camp for show and putt for dough,”<sup>172</sup> they still reported on the naturalistic activities and therefore represented Clinton as a president who was able to re-capture his raw masculinity, even if only for a few days.

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Todd Purdum, “Night Under the Stars,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1995.

<sup>170</sup> Todd Purdum, “Tired Clinton.”

<sup>171</sup> Nate Rawlings, “Brief History,” *Time*, January 9, 2009.

<sup>172</sup> Calvin Trillin and Janice Horowitz, “Camp for Show, Putt for Dough,” *Time*, July 28, 1997.

When Obama sought rest and relaxation at Yellowstone National Park, news media was sure to situate him *against* the natural setting's flora and the fauna rather than in harmony with them. Former *New York Times* White House correspondent Sheryl Gay Stolberg depicted the president within "view of a red-rock butte and a big bend in the Colorado River down below." Obama expressed his discomfort with the "bears and moose and elk" in speeches and in a joke, which made him seem out of place in wildlife and more comfortable with people, policy and ideas.<sup>173</sup> Rather than taking time out west for regeneration or rest, Obama was seen as exploring the area to inform his environmental policy or prepare for a town hall meeting with locals. These juxtapositions of Obama and nature or Obama and western vacation sites worked to re-feminize his political persona and make him seem out-of-place in the masculine west. The implication was that Obama's rejection of a masculinity grounded in physicality or the body in favor of a more feminized persona or what *NPR*'s Jacki Lyden called a "cerebral masculinity"<sup>174</sup> prevented him from ever re-masculinizing or re-capturing his unrefined masculine power, even in the regenerative West. His trips West were usually politicized, such as the Yellowstone trip, or constructed as stops along the perpetual presidential tour of America, such as a Grand Canyon visit.

Before images of Obama in nature or mastering western terrain were even constructed, news media politicized the Grand Canyon visit. The *New York Times* viewed the trip to Yellowstone and a stop at the Grand Canyon as opportunities for Obama to embrace (or appear to embrace) conservation efforts and "an invitation to celebrate a

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<sup>173</sup> Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "On Canyon Visit."

<sup>174</sup> Jacki Lyden, "Black Masculinity: Dueling Images of Power," *NPR All Things Considered*, November 8, 2008.

profound and truly American idea.”<sup>175</sup> Obama was seen as being in a unique position as a liberal Democrat in the era of climate change awareness to stop allowing “commercial and recreational activities to trump conservation.”<sup>176</sup> The coverage framed the trip as though it were a campaign stop or photo opportunity rather than a private leisure trip. The president’s outdoor athletic pursuits were similarly constructed as stunts, pseudo-events or simply proof that Obama’s talents and achievements were intellectual, not physical or appropriately masculine.

The *New York Times* assumed Obama’s attempts at outdoors sports were in some ways political stunts, and they called him “athletic” but “not exactly an outdoorsman in the mold of... Dick Cheney.”<sup>177</sup> Obama’s genuine interest in nature activities such as fly-fishing and hiking was questioned and compared to his other meager attempts at middle-class sports such as bowling or manly outdoor sports, such as skeet shooting or mountain biking, as *The New Republic* reminded readers.<sup>178</sup> The Cheney allusion reminded readers that the former vice president, a Wyoming native, was well known for his love of hunting and other outdoor hobbies, potentially making Obama seem weak or feminized in comparison. However, Cheney’s aggressive outdoorsman image might also have implicitly bolstered Obama’s image because Cheney did not, in fact or in essence, resemble a Baby Boomer Democrat in the least. Obama’s departure from the previous administration’s image might have been postured as an improvement or a sign that masculine archetypes were shifting.

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<sup>175</sup> “The President in the Park” [Editorial], *New York Times*, August 15, 2009.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “On Canyon Visit.”

<sup>178</sup> Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “On Canyon Visit”; Noreen Malone, “Barack Obama’s Bicycle-Riding Is a Glimpse into His Soul,” *The New Republic*, August 16, 2013.

*The Working Vacation*

The presidency is a non-stop job, but scenes from a president's private life depict him as away from state or official business. Presidential vacations are semi-private performances of leisure, but these leisure scenes are presented and understood by news media through the frameworks of the president as a family man and as a masculine figure. By categorizing some trips as working vacations, but notably not all, news professionals who presented Clinton and Obama as "working at play"<sup>179</sup> contributed to a narrative refrain that sought to defend or legitimize presidential travel and leisure.

Clinton's trips to Martha's Vineyard, unlike his political trips to rustic locales, were represented as pure, non-working vacations. News media constructed an image of Clinton resting and relaxing, not thinking or talking about politics. A *Time* article noted an aide saying, in reference to both Clintons: "They want to rest. They want to have fun. They've had a hard year."<sup>180</sup> His trips were indeed justified or defensible, according to journalists, but only because he worked so hard, was exhausted and overworked and simply could not go on without a brief, non-working escape. Clinton needed time to heal and recuperate and was therefore frequently cut-off from the political world or took extra long trips with more extravagance and fun.

Clinton was known for not liking to take vacations, and an image from *Time* in which his chief of staff "nearly had to drag the workaholic Clinton from the Oval Office" is an apt example of his resistance to combining work and vacation.<sup>181</sup> However, when his staff finally got him out of Washington, Clinton did "not tolerate shop talk on the [golf] links" and tried to "clear the cobwebs from his head" by reading paperbacks, doing

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<sup>179</sup> Aron, *Working at Play*.

<sup>180</sup> Michael Duffy, "Learning to Be Lazy," *Time*, September 5, 1994.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

crossword puzzles, playing with his dog Buddy, playing cards or Scrabble and spending time with Chelsea.<sup>182</sup> Another *Time* article imagined the Clintons as “policy wonks” out-of-place in paradise because the couple could not resist discussing healthcare reform and political theory with aides even on a tropical vacation.<sup>183</sup> So while most of Clinton’s vacations were pure, non-working escapades, news media also assured readers that the president was exercising his mind whilst he relaxed his body. However, journalists across media outlets pointed out his vacation itinerary sometimes included informal phone calls to world leaders, speeches, his weekly radio address or town hall meetings because, *Time* claimed, “he couldn’t resist” these opportunities for socializing and being in the spotlight.<sup>184</sup> Occasionally, news stories about Clinton centered on political optics, such as the “unseemly symbolism”<sup>185</sup> of a presidential Hawaiian vacation during a natural disaster.

News media constantly reminded readers that Obama’s trips were working vacations. Sometimes these reminders explicitly pointed out White House advisors, briefings or the press pool of journalists that followed him and called attention to the unnaturalness of Obama in the untamed, unpolished west.<sup>186</sup> On a Martha’s Vineyard trip, an advisor assured news media that Obama was staying up to date on the healthcare debate and that he was receiving daily briefings, despite openly taking breaks for golf, the

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<sup>182</sup> Michael Duffy, “Learning to Be Lazy”; John M. Broder, “For Clinton, a Vacation with No Golf, No Sailing, No Parties, No Kennedys,” *New York Times*, August 23, 1998; John M. Broder, “A Sunny Island Vacation, With Just a Little Work,” *New York Times*, January 4, 1998; Belinda Luscombe, “Bill Relaxes,” *Time*, September 1, 1997.

<sup>183</sup> Michael Duffy, “Policy Wonks.”

<sup>184</sup> Michael Duffy, “Learning to Be Lazy”; John M. Broder, “A Sunny Island Vacation”;

<sup>185</sup> Eleanor Clift, “On the levee.”

<sup>186</sup> “Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “On Canyon Visit”; Matthew Cooper, “Martha’s Vineyard: Let Obama Have His Vacation,” *Newsweek*, August 12, 2014; Ashley Parker, “Real and Rare Vacation.”

beach and family.<sup>187</sup> *Time* reminded readers that Lyndon Johnson and George W. Bush both “ran parts of their respective wars from Texas ranches” and Jimmy Carter “found respite in his hometown... toss softballs around and fish from a rowboat on his pond.”<sup>188</sup>

Sometimes the working vacation defense was used implicitly, by suggesting the president’s relaxation time was part of the presidential performance of lifestyle or necessary for being a good president. The *New York Times* discussed the cultural history of American domestic travel, pointing out the “paradox of American politics” that the more frequent vacations became in the postwar era for the working class and wealthy alike, “the more criticism presidents have faced” for their trips.<sup>189</sup> Americans secured more vacation time but expected the president to do more work, a contradiction that Jackie Calmes suggested was due to “Round-the-clock news coverage and the Internet,” which have “intensified attention on a president’s every move...the numbers, and the reach,” of journalists and critics.”<sup>190</sup> So even as Americans became more accustomed to the ideas of vacation, idleness, domestic travel or fun, as Aron argued they were, US presidents fielded harsher and more frequent scrutiny from news media for their private travels and leisure.

An *Associated Press* story that ran in multiple outlets reported on a conversation Obama had with UK Prime Minister David Cameron that speaks to this need to real breaks or vacations, not working vacations. The world leaders discussed the need for breaks and “hours to just think” in addition to the need for lengthier vacations because otherwise they might “start making mistakes,” “lose the big picture,” or lose a sense of

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<sup>187</sup> Jeff Zeleny, “Vacation on the Vineyard,” *New York Times*, August 25, 2009.

<sup>188</sup> Nate Rawlings, “Brief History.”

<sup>189</sup> Jackie Calmes, “It’s Called a Vacation, but for the Obamas, It’s Not That Simple,” *New York Times*, August 22, 2010.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid*; Jeff Zeleny, “Vacation on the Vineyard.”

feeling or good judgment which “politics is all about... The judgment you bring to make decisions.”<sup>191</sup> In this way, news media also sought to normalize or defend non-working trips or breaks by reminding readers that vacation was good for the president’s mind and ultimately the smooth running of the government. It should be noted that the conversation was overheard through a rogue microphone which, on the one hand, suggested that these are Obama and Cameron’s real thoughts on the issues but, on the other hand, revealed that the president knew that taking time for leisure was a delicate task.

### **Sports: Golf, Basketball, and the Identity Politics of Leisure**

The two major facets of a president’s identity as an American man of leisure, vacation and sports, were often discussed within the same articles or even sentences. As symbolically loaded consumer or aesthetic choices, vacation and sports were the two simplest ways news media sought to understand the presidents’ authentic private characters. Athletics and sports have been bound-up in the vacation experience since at least the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly as resort vacations began to offer tourists amusements and organized sport competitions that were actively separated by gender.<sup>192</sup> Athletics were a part of private leisure time in which the president was not only having fun or being unproductive but was also removed from the family and private domestic sphere. Presidential sports narratives were, of course, still gendered in many ways, but these gendered representations of the presidents at play were focused more on

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<sup>191</sup> Associated Press, “Obama on Vacationing and Time to Think,” *New York Times*, July 7 2009.

<sup>192</sup> Aron, 70-72.

the masculine body or the symbolic associations that sports carried rather than how they fit into a family structures.

Despite the pervasiveness of news media using golf styles and images to decode Clinton and Obama's souls, it was not the only sport used to understand the private lives of the presidents. For Clinton, his reputation as an avid sports fan also contributed to his image as masculine athletic figure and helped shape his democratic "regular guy" side. For Obama, basketball narratives were the main vehicles for solidifying his image as a black masculine athletic figure. However, golf is a particularly powerful and persistent if somewhat overlooked force in news media's construction of private presidential personae. Scenes from the golf course therefore demand slightly more in-depth examination.

Golf is a highly mythologized sport that looms in the annals of twentieth century presidential history, almost universally. The sport, once a rich man's pastime and still seen as "very much a capitalist sport... associated with the bourgeois and aristocracy" and "explicitly concerned with money,"<sup>193</sup> has been a potent yet somewhat inconstant symbol for representing presidential character, judgment, personality, integrity and countless other masculine traits associated with the office. Historically, golf has been a bourgeois and therefore white male sport in which the politically and financially powerful could talk business in a hypermasculine social space. Golf experienced a brief surge in popularity in the 1990s and early 2000s, most likely because of Tiger Woods's unprecedented domination of the sport in which he broke long held records and won countless competitions and awards. Woods, who is white, black, American Indian and

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<sup>193</sup> Harper Cossar, "Televised Golf and the Creation of Narrative," *Film & History* 35.1 (2005), 55.



Asian, brought a certain sense of coolness to the game which had until then featured players who almost always fit the stereotype of white, older, wealthy and decidedly uncool. He helped transform the game into a more democratized game that people of all backgrounds could participate in.

A 1995 scene in which Clinton participated in the Bob Hope Chrysler Classic golf tournament alongside professional golfers, celebrities, Gerald Ford and George HW Bush provided a window into how golf was seen as historically or institutionally connected to the US presidency. But it also demonstrated how changing cultural conceptions of golf wrought new conversations and understandings of the sport's symbolic function in US political culture. In *Time's* coverage, the ex-presidents were portrayed as doddering and incompetent, injuring at least three bystanders with rogue golf shots.<sup>194</sup> The ex-presidents appeared foolish or out of shape, almost disoriented or befuddled. Clinton's golf performance that day was nothing special, but his minor successes compared to Ford and Bush's violent and unskilled shots made Clinton seem careful, solid and more than adequate. Most importantly, the officeholder appeared youthful and virile. Both *Time* and the *New York Times* went on to list various presidential golfers and what their styles of play symbolized.<sup>195</sup> If Taft, Eisenhower, Ford, Truman and Nixon were all fervent golf players, it was only normal or expected that Clinton should be too. Scenes from the fairways usually reminded readers that golf was historically an integral and institutional part of the presidential performance but was also a way in which the presidents were aesthetically associated with a white, usually wealthy or powerful, manhood.

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<sup>194</sup> Todd Purdum, "Caution: Presidents at Play. Three of Them," *New York Times*, February 16, 1995.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid; Jesse Birnbaum, "Fore Play," *Time*, February 27, 1995.

*Coach Clinton: Golf, Sports Fandom and Socioeconomic Class*

Although golf was becoming more visible in US culture and the game's social and cultural connotations were changing, Clinton's love of golf was perhaps still too elitist for some pundits, which forced him and news media to emphasize or clarify golf's new populist associations when the opportunity arose. At a golf tournament, Clinton explained that golf "was no longer the preserve of the elites" and that the sport's rising popularity allowed public courses to be constructed which in turn allowed "people able to play who never could have played 10, 20 years ago."<sup>196</sup> Sports as a universalizing or democratizing force, and the president as a conduit of this egalitarianism, was a common, albeit latent, narrative that news media employed. For Clinton, this meant that golf's associations with the white male upper class and white political power in particular<sup>197</sup> were also attached to his image, potentially undermining his claim of being a populist politician but also potentially bolstering his backstory of social mobility. The populist turn in golf's symbolic associations was key to humanizing the, in fact, wealthy, white and powerful Clinton.

Clinton was known for taking weekday meetings and briefings on the White house putting green.<sup>198</sup> The *New York Times* compared Clinton's easygoing, golf-filled life to Eisenhower's playing multiple games a day in a period of postwar placidity and prosperity.<sup>199</sup> Clinton's golf obsession, and the apparently abundant leisure time to indulge it, suggested similar political circumstances and may have helped reinforce the notion that the national economy was healthy and active, just like the president. Clinton's

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<sup>196</sup> Todd Purdum, "Presidents at Play."

<sup>197</sup> Harper Cossar, "Televised Golf."

<sup>198</sup> Carney, "In Golf We Trust."

<sup>199</sup> Don Van Natta Jr., "Taking Second Chances: Par for Clinton's Course," *New York Times*, August 29, 1999.

well-known love of playing golf the White House putting green may have prompted jokes about his focus and priorities, but it was seen as part of his political persona or indicative of the nation's running smoothly, that all state business was under control because the president could relax and play golf outside "until it's absolutely dark."<sup>200</sup>

Clinton's well-documented proclivity for taking "bushels of mulligans" in his golf career was a preoccupation for journalists and became fodder for evaluating his other affinities for social welfare programs and other safety nets that provide second chances for citizens.<sup>201</sup> Some approaches to covering Clinton's mulligans defended or normalized the practice by mentioning Nixon's questionable game tactics or other presidents' picking up the game as a political calculations, suggesting Clinton's many second chances were simply part of the presidential mythos or that the tricks and quirks of each president's game became parts of their legends and legacies.<sup>202</sup> Journalists sometimes directly compared reports of Clinton's golf antics to contemporary political or social issues. For instance, Clinton's notorious score-padding and mulligan-taking was once seen as a parallel to the health-care debate "after insisting that nothing less than one-hundred-percent coverage would do, he settled for ninety-five" and of the "two or three or four mullies that he's already taken on the Haiti issue."<sup>203</sup> News media also pointed out the many metaphorical mulligans Clinton had been granted, both by the Senate and his wife in relation to his various sex scandals.<sup>204</sup> The "perfect metaphor for his presidency,"<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Carney, "In Golf We Trust."

<sup>201</sup> Voters were potentially familiar with the term "mulligan" for a number of reasons. Mulligan is best known as a golf term or a term for a "do-over" in other sports and games but is sometimes used in politics to describe a losing candidate in a primary election who changes his or her political affiliation and runs on another party's ticket.

<sup>202</sup> Jon Goldstein and Janice Horowitz, "The Putt Stops Here," *Time*, March 24, 1997.

<sup>203</sup> Charles McGrath, "Mulligan Stew," *The New Yorker*, September 19, 1994.

<sup>204</sup> Van Natta Jr., "Taking Second Chances."

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

golf became a way for journalists to try to see into Clinton's political soul, to better understand or predict his political character or guiding principles.

Other mulligan narratives took-on more cynical views, suggesting the mulligans allowed Clinton to lie about his low golf score. The implication of his score padding was that he would lie or cheat to get what he wanted in the political world. Questioning Clinton's political integrity based on his golf game was a common trope news media used to understand what role golf and sport played in shaping his approaches to politics and governing. If golf integrity was indicative of political integrity, Clinton might easily compromise in the political arena if he was willing to compromise truth or integrity or mastery in the sports arena. If President Clinton takes mulligan after mulligan and misrepresents something as trivial as his golf score, so the narrative went, how far will he bend the rules or, worse, compromise his or America's integrity?

Despite the all the golf narratives and analysis from news media, golf was one half of Clinton's athletic persona, and his connections to other sports were the other half. The president's image as a general sports and athletics fan also contributed to his reputation as a populist everyman. Clinton sometimes spoke of his love of boxing, baseball, football, rugby and the Olympics,<sup>206</sup> all either aggressive contact sports or, like baseball and the Olympics, closely associated with American idealism or international goodwill. Within news discourse, two competing images of Clinton-as-sports-fan emerged. The first was the ideal version: the Rhodes Scholar who dabbled successfully in numerous sports, both physical contact sports and more strategic ones. The second was the populist who loved McDonald's and played sports or was associated with sports

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<sup>206</sup> George Plimpton, "Jock Talk," *The New Yorker*, August 12, 1996.

vicariously through watching and talking about sports, but not by participating in a competitive or contact sport. Clinton's mere appreciation for and casual participation in athletics also reinforced his image as adequately masculine.

Clinton's relationships with boxer Muhammad Ali and baseball hero Willie Mays contributed to Clinton's image as a legitimate athlete but one who fostered his connections to athletics through these associations with real athletes. Images of Clinton hugging Ali or sharing a meal with Mays worked to position him as a popular figure within the sports world.<sup>207</sup> By being seen spending time with former professional athletes, news media portrayed Clinton as "one of the guys" who, like other midlife heteronormative males in this period, was assumed to have a natural affinity for athletics. This rhetoric reinforced the connection between the masculine worlds of sports and politics. Similarly, Clinton was also established as a "sporty white male" or "natural baseball dad" candidate, the kind of man parents would want coaching their kids' baseball teams because he appeared to be "full of energy and overflowing with empathy."<sup>208</sup> Whereas less sprightly-seeming candidates such as Bob Dole may have appeared more like the curmudgeonly umpire, Clinton's established appreciation of sports and fitness (though, perhaps, lack of talent or actual participation) and his upbeat energy were presented as qualities that Americans should want in a political leader.

*At Home on the Asphalt: Obama, Golf, Basketball and Race*

The contents of President Obama's character were similarly evaluated based on his styles of sport play. The racial or social connotations that certain sports carried once

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<sup>207</sup> Plimpton, "Jock Talk."

<sup>208</sup> Ann Hulbert, "Angels in the Infield," *The New Republic*, November 18, 1996; Purdum, "Tired Clinton in Tetons."

again colored how presidential athletics were covered, this time more overtly. Described as “long” and “slow,” with time for “hunting for balls in the woods” and some minor “trash-talking,”<sup>209</sup> Obama’s golf game was presented as somewhat shaky or lacking, all visual and oratory flair, no real substance or game to show for all the big talk. Obama’s trash talking was an easy metaphor for what some critics may have seen as a certain flashiness or oratory prowess that lacked real substance. The slow, methodical nature of his game and his infamy for not “fudging”<sup>210</sup> his score and his “deep respect for the game’s ethos”<sup>211</sup> suggested the *New York Times* presidential reporters saw in Obama an inherent pragmatism or patience. Obama’s imperfect but careful, studied golf style contributed to his image as a careful, studied politician who may have the right words, the right clothes, and the right high-minded political ideals, but he might not have been the efficient, masterful political machine America was accustomed to seeing in the Oval Office.

Golf, as a self-fashioned consumer choice or demonstration of personal taste, may not have been a “black enough” sport for black American voters and was positioned in news coverage as an at least partially-conscious way in which in Obama displayed aesthetic signs of white manhood.<sup>212</sup> Just as Obama’s appropriation of stereotypically “white” images and activities like golf, his “white” golfers’ attire or corny “dad fashion” sometimes complicated his identity as a mixed-race male who was a highly visible representative of contemporary black manhood. His blackness was not situated as inherently resistant to white men or white culture, but golf’s history as a hypermasculine

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<sup>209</sup> Helene Cooper, “For Obama, Golf is a Very Leisurely Pursuit,” *New York Times*, August 27, 2009.

<sup>210</sup> Cooper, “Leisurely Pursuit.”

<sup>211</sup> Larry Dorman, “Make Room for Golf Clubs in the Oval Office,” *New York Times*, December 30, 2008.

<sup>212</sup> Peter Beinart, “Black like Me,” *The New Republic*, February 5, 2007.

space in which historically disenfranchised people, such as African-Americans, had struggled to gain proper access may have informed news discourse surrounding Obama's competing images of serious golfer and emblem of racial authenticity. News media reconciled Obama's blackness with his golf playing by providing counter-narratives or images of him playing basketball, a popular sport associated far more with city life, youth culture and black culture. Basketball imagery, comparisons to black athletes and scenes of Obama in pick-up games were used to encode his essence and construct an iconography of his personality, but it was also used to imagine Obama as a democratizing force.

An article by Michelle Obama's brother Craig Robinson, a former college star and coach at several prominent universities, described the president's style of basketball play and was direct about the ways in which basketball could be used as a metaphor for understanding Obama's true character and political style. In *Time*, Robinson asked "What does Barack's game say about the man, about the way he's going to lead this country through these very trying times?... He's competitive but inclusive. He's unselfish...he's consistent...classy, efficient, and considerate..."<sup>213</sup> Setting the scene in urban Chicago, among the countless public courts and pick-up games, this narrative of Obama's life and personality as deeply textured by basketball could have grounded the image of the (then future) president's source of power in his physicality and athletic prowess. Rather, this sort of counter-narrative of Obama's basketball life emphasizes how the game helped strengthen his intellectual and emotional powers, thereby potentially feminizing him with

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<sup>213</sup> Craig Robinson, "B-Ball with Barack," *Time*, December 17, 2008.

the idea of a “cerebral masculinity” in which power and self-control are located in the mind, not the body.<sup>214</sup>

In the *New York Times*, political reporter (and one of many Obama family biographers) Jodi Kantor reported that when Obama and his contemporaries were aspiring politicians, they liked “showing up at South Side parks and playing with whoever” was around, political elites and regular people may have mixed, resulting in “someone from the street and a potential Nobel Prize winner on the same team.”<sup>215</sup> The equalizing qualities of basketball, most notably its transcending race and class, were attached to Obama’s image, working as a reflection of his universal appeal and ability to unite people from across political and social spectrums. These narratives that placed Obama on urban basketball courts and in public school gymnasiums, with men of various cultural and economic backgrounds, generations and races contributed to the idea that he was a cool president, young, vivacious and hip enough to play this physical team sport with real men in real scenarios. Basketball helped reinforce Obama’s blackness, youth, and vitality and reestablished his appeal as the antithesis of the very hegemonic male whiteness that his golfer image was creating. If Obama was cool enough to unite young urban adults with politicians and attorneys on the basketball court, perhaps he could unite the larger political and social divisions that plagued the nation.

The *New York Times* also presented a scene a 2008 Democratic primary event in Iowa in which the Chicago Bulls announcer Ray Clay emceed a campaign event in a “cavernous” professional basketball arena. Just as Clay’s booming voice introduced Michael Jordan to fans at the start of each game, he announced Obama’s entrance to

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<sup>214</sup> Jacki Lyden, “Black Masculinity: Dueling Images of Power.”

<sup>215</sup> Jodi Kantor, “One Place Where Obama Goes Elbow to Elbow,” *New York Times*, June 1, 2007.



voters at the campaign event like an athletic superstar: “From our neighboring state of Illinois, a 6-foot-2-inch force for change... Senator Barack Obama!”<sup>216</sup> This scene captured one instance in which politics and the presidency were directly compared to sports and athleticism.

Obama was, over the years, also compared to Magic Johnson and Alex Rodriguez and was even seen as having the “confidence of [Tiger] Woods teeing off and the swagger of [Derek] Jeter swatting a double to right field.”<sup>217</sup> The comparisons to Jeter and Woods were notable because both were highly successful biracial athletes. Whether the biracial connection was made intentionally remains unclear but does illustrate one way in which news media sought to understand or contextualize Obama’s race and cultural affiliations. The comparisons to iconic, beloved professional athletes also encapsulated how crucial personal sports narratives, reputations or images were for constructing both political and personal personae. Obama’s political superstardom was solidified partly by the ways in which news media compared him to successful and masculine black sports superstars and constructed him as a president “who’s got game.”<sup>218</sup> Obama’s primary image as a basketball player in the likes of Michael Jordan also exposed how news media used the larger mythos, associations and discourses of golf, basketball or other sport cultures to try to understand the presidents as men with favorite sports or private interests first and as politicians second.

The shift from sports as a metaphor for *political character* to a metaphor for *private character* is significant because the associations that golf carries became far more intimate and abstract when situated as a window into Obama’s soul rather than his work.

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<sup>216</sup> Jeff Zeleny, “Hoops Fans Can’t Wait For Obama To Take Office,” *New York Times*, January 9, 2009.

<sup>217</sup> George Vecsey, “The Primary Season is Embracing Sports Images,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2008.

<sup>218</sup> Jeff Zeleny, “Hoops Fans Can’t Wait.”

Clinton's golf game was indicative of his political character, which could be measured in compromises, lies, legislative output and other tangible measurements. Obama's style of golf play was representative of his inner character, the parts of a person's personality best observed in private settings and evaluated in intangibles such as fair play, integrity, patience and self-restraint. Because the characteristics being symbolically represented with style of play were not concrete, Obama was open to much more scrutiny and speculation, which sometimes resulted in news content that perpetuated the idea that Obama's racial and social identities were in flux or up for negotiation.

*Sensitive Compartmentalizing: Golfing While the World Burns*

Discourse about Clinton's ability to separate his work and personal lives mostly surfaced when journalists tried to explain the president's serenity and focus in the days preceding his perjury trial. Rather than understandably distracted from political life and work by his potential impeachment, Clinton talked foreign policy with world leaders and reporters and demonstrated the talent politicians have for "dividing their thoughts into compartments..." and keeping separate "affairs of state from scurrilous charges about affairs of the heart."<sup>219</sup> *Time* also saw Clinton as compartmentalizing his lives, suggested that this forced others, such as Vice President Al Gore, to do the same, and that the demarcation affected how he was viewed as a public figure with a private life.<sup>220</sup> Clinton had failed to keep his lives separate when his "personal failings" plagued his political life and eclipsed his "professional successes."<sup>221</sup> Clinton was rarely criticized for taking time for vacation or sports because he had already cultivated an image as a workaholic who

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<sup>219</sup> William Safire, "Presume Innocence," *New York Times*, January 22, 1998.

<sup>220</sup> Michael Duffy and Karen Tumulty, "Can this marriage be saved?" *Time*, July 12, 1999.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

only took vacations when he truly needed healing or regeneration and responsibly balanced golfing and sports fandom with his presidential duties. Even in crisis, he was seen as striving to keep his personae distinct.

News media later discussed compartmentalization when Obama took time for leisure and fun when tragedies or sensitive events were occurring. A late-term gaffe in which Obama expressed condolences to the family of an American terror victim and immediately left the press conference for a round of golf is the finest example of this criticism. The post-terrorist attack golf outing revealed the “essence of a man” who, for the conservative columnist Michael Goodwin at *The New York Post*, was clearly “an empty-headed frat boy, numb to the world”<sup>222</sup> and callously indifferent to the savagery and the “optics”<sup>223</sup> of his actions. The popular refrain in the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker* and *NPR* was that the president had been caught “playing golf while the world burns.”<sup>224</sup> Obama’s ability to detach from and compartmentalize the spheres of his life was often seen as in bad taste, as socially tone-deaf,<sup>225</sup> or even evidence of his “hollowness” or “passivity”<sup>226</sup> and contributed to his image as an icy Northerner with a “cool, emotional detachment.”<sup>227</sup>

Some news outlets re-wrote the story of Obama’s tasteless timing by reminding readers that fidelity to the job requires dealing “in death one moment” and making “coldhearted decisions” the next.<sup>228</sup> Originally criticized as yet another example of the

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<sup>222</sup> Michael Goodwin, “Obama’s golf outing after Foley beheading was a huge mistake,” *New York Post*, August 24, 2014.

<sup>223</sup> Scott Horsley, “For Obama, August is the Cruellest Month,” *NPR All Things Considered*, August 22, 2014.

<sup>224</sup> Baker and Hirschfield Davis, “A Terrorist Horror.”

<sup>225</sup> John Cassidy, “In Defense of the First Golfer,” *The New Yorker*, August 22, 2014.

<sup>226</sup> Goodwin, “Obama’s golf outing.”

<sup>227</sup> Peter Baker and Julia Hirschfield Davis, “A Terrorist Horror.”

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

president's indifference, the scene was re-envisioned as a necessary evil of "the most stressful job on the planet" but unfortunately "created an awkward juxtaposition of sober public appearances and island diversions."<sup>229</sup> News media re-defined the story of Obama's taking leisure time in the face of a terrorist attack and defended the tactless move by reinforcing the notion that a president must keep his fun-loving private self and somber public persona separate, although the two sometimes distastefully meet.

### *Conclusions*

Competing images or discourses of the presidents as populist family men or hedonist elitists, duplicitous opportunists or pragmatic homebodies, often influenced how news media talked about the presidents as highly visible public figures who had private lives and interests. Martha's Vineyard narratives in particular were used for categorizing the presidents in these terms, but news media's coverage of the site, from Clinton's first trip to Obama's most recent, revealed that any destination could be represented and reimagined in countless, sometimes unpredictable ways.

News scenes of off-duty presidents in natural or rural vacation settings explored the concept of Baby Boomer presidents being too refined or de-masculinized and in need of the masculine regenerative powers of wild, natural settings. When news media had no previous framework of a president in a certain location or displaying the trappings of a place's cultural associations in some way, such as Obama as a hypermasculine outdoorsman or Clinton as a tropical beachgoer, nature vacation narratives often shifted

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<sup>229</sup> Associated Press, "After Somber Statement, Obama Golfs With Friends," *New York Times*, August 20, 2014.

thematic focus onto political or environmental policy, which sometimes seemed to reflect the presidents' more cerebral or ideas-based masculinities. The presidents' complicated cultural and racial identities influenced and informed journalists' editorial decisions to focus on a place's cultural codes, connotations, and optics or to not cover certain vacations at all.

The use of the "working vacation" label increased over this period of presidential vacationing and was used to defend or legitimate presidential leisure time. This instinct most likely stems from the American discomfort with idleness and unproductivity that Aron outlined as well as the "paradox" of US presidential travel in which presidents are rarely seen as truly deserving or in need of a vacation. Due to the 24-hour news cycle and the constant demands of digital journalism that vacation coverage would have been mired in, there was apparently never a good time for a president to take a vacation, nor did he deserve one.

Like vacation travel, golf and sports were also used as codes for cracking the cipher of presidents' political or private characters. Accounts of Clinton and Obama as athletes or sports fans encoded the presidents' images with the cultural, racial and social connotations that particular sports carried. How news outlets represented presidential athletic pursuits provided a window into how sports were used for representing powerful public figures as real people and were used to help define the precise contours of a president's masculine cultural identity. Frequent news representations of presidents at play helped normalize and perpetuate an iconography of hegemonic masculinity that focused on the presidential body, masculine display and historically white, masculine institutions.

Presidential compartmentalization was sometimes presented by news media as a noble reaction to the collision of public responsibilities and private leisure. Obama's post-terror attack golfing outing and the ways in which the incident's larger meaning was reworked and reimagined over the course of a few days' coverage, for example, demonstrated that news coverage of a single event or act could change dramatically in a very short period depending on who reported the event, how it was covered and by which publication. But stories with similar themes of compartmentalization and the difficulties of maintaining public and private selves latently suggested the presidents were imagined to be struggling to find proper work-life balances and master the theater or optics of political performance.

#### ***IV: Conclusion***

When Clinton famously played his saxophone on *The Arsenio Hall Show* and aligned himself with connotations of blackness or when Obama was feminized by a “wimpy” pitch he threw out at Chicago White Sox game (donning “mom jeans” and clunky white sneakers), it was clear that something significant was happening in the arena of presidential image cultivation. The conceptions of these Democratic US presidents in their unique political media culture were increasingly flexible, soft, sentimental or even “feminine.” News coverage of presidential leisure time in the 1990s and 2000s sometimes reflected larger cultural ideas about what it meant to identify with a particular sex, gender, race or class status and the political, social or historical implications of doing so.

This chapter will detail the central concepts, themes and dynamics at work in the phenomenon of news media zealously scrutinizing US presidents’ private lives. Popular representations of the presidents as family men, tourists or athletes were usually ruminations on much deeper cultural and political issues than they appeared to be on the surface. This study, at heart, explored ideas about politicians as relatable everymen, news as a social construction, the influence of 1960s and 1970s idealism on contemporary masculinity and political culture, consumerism as political expression, identity as fluid and performative, politics as a marketing game and “soft news” as an underappreciated site of important political and cultural discourse. The nuanced interactions of these abstractions with the forces of hegemonic and Baby Boomer masculinities are the focus of this final chapter.

The larger-than-life figures who dominated news media and affected the sociopolitical conditions in which people experienced everyday life were understood in this period as fallible humans who had lives, interests, emotions and relationships outside of politics. Implicit in news media analysis of a president's taste in vacation spots, styles of leisure, styles of sports play, and the cultural associations of these consumer and aesthetic choices was the idea that a president's "private" leisure time could represent his political principles or authentic inner identity. By situating presidents as private family men, athletes, and tourists, news media stories amplified and sometimes exaggerated the pervasiveness of Baby Boomer ideals of masculinity and identity in Democratic politics. When the public was reminded of the most vulnerable and intimate components of a president's life through sometimes in-depth, sometimes-shallow media narratives, an image of who the president was as a human rather than just a faraway figurehead materialized.

When snapshots of presidents in private life were scrutinized by news media, readers and reporters' desires to identify with the politically powerful were magnified. Despite their myriad complexities and intersections, gender, masculinity, race and class were ways of easily categorizing presidents as regular, private citizens for a readership with endlessly diverse experiences and knowledge of what "regular" meant. Journalists grappled with this multiplicity of reader perspectives by applying stereotypes, frameworks, historical references, dominant ideologies, metaphors and binary categorizations of people and culture to the events they covered. Readers could then, in



theory, fuse the latest news depictions of family time or a vacation or presidential athletics with the conceptions of presidential power or masculinity they already had.

The malleable quality of facts and information in this news genre reminds us that the news is an interpretive process that is influenced by social constructs and subjectivities. The gender, class, race and personal connotations or frames that a president's family dynamic or vacation spot or favorite sport carried could (and often did) dramatically transform depending on the president or the publication. This demonstrated not that individual journalists or news outlets were erratic or unreliable but that interpretations of events could vary wildly. The problem therein is not that the facts or events were inaccurate but that the parts of a scene that were emphasized and the cultural codes, popular ideas or reflexive frameworks that were called upon to explain them could be idiosyncratic. Political journalists pulled away the veil of presidential façades, but their news representations were still deeply shaped by institutional formulas, routines and ideologies that have been in place for decades and may have been difficult to circumvent even if a reporter or publication sought to break the mold.

Clinton, Obama and their Democratic Party contemporaries were deeply influenced by the concomitantly idealistic and discordant sociopolitical milieu of the 1960s and 1970s in which they came of age. This unique cultural epoch championed the values of equality, vulnerability, empathy and the fluidity of gender and other identities. These principles became the hallmarks of the Baby Boomer mindset and lifestyle that infiltrated Democratic politics and policy in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The connection between Democratic politics and Baby Boomer ideals gave the party's

politicians license to display softer, kinder iterations of masculinity. Democratic presidents' private lives were typically viewed through this lens of Baby Boomer masculinity in late twentieth and early twenty-first century news media representations. Clinton and Obama were seen as highly successful fathers and supportive, unthreatened husbands of formidable, career-oriented wives. Baby Boomer presidents, though, could not simply be husbands and fathers. They had to be great husbands with well-behaved children and wives who were equally extraordinary. Being a present, publically adoring father and husband was the minimum. Fostering intelligent and sensitive citizens of the world and appearing inspired by powerful women was the masculine high mark. Even with gender expectations changing and marriage and children becoming less compulsory, family life was still a vital site for fashioning masculine personae.

Journalists and readers were striving to understand the presidents as seemingly average husbands and fathers who had worked their ways into extraordinary circumstances not only with deft political moves but with careful personal image control as well. Political power could not be credible without control or at least the appearance of control. Presidential power was not only asserted over the nation or citizens but was made visible when the president appeared in control of the pieces of his personal life: his wife, his kids and his image as a masculine patriarch. But despite increasingly progressive ideas of Baby Boomer fatherhood and masculinities influencing political discourse, representations of presidential sports and fun often reinforced the presidency as overtly, inherently and therefore hegemonically masculine.

The presidency required its officeholders to view sports as fun and individually fulfilling experiences but also to see formal sport participation as a necessity for fostering

and displaying institutionally appropriate masculine personae. The competing images of a president as a masculine figure, as emotional in family life but physical in sports play, suggested that displaying a decidedly Baby Boomer version of masculinity did not preclude modern men from adopting old-fashioned or physical masculine qualities in appropriate social situations. Proper masculinity in this period was, then, a delicate, thoughtful balance that required tasteful self-awareness of one's public performance of gender and self. Baby Boomers' more relaxed ideals of masculinity had begun to permeate political culture. But more relaxed definitions of masculinity still required politicians to be men and to display overt masculinity at certain times. This may have reinforced the presidency and politics as an arena reserved for men, which discursively excluded women and men who were "too" feminine from serious presidential candidacy.

A president's taste in sports and vacation environments were performances of his class, race, taste or politics. Sports and tourism are cultural institutions that help people understand themselves as corporeal, politicized and gendered beings. But they also help people formulate and display inner or intangible cultural identifications such as urban or suburban, elitist or populist, macho or effete, physical or cerebral. Cultural identity was, in this way, understood as material and performative, something a person chose to assert or display and not necessarily representative of actual ethnicity or socioeconomic status. This mindset can help explain why presidents never travelled to international vacation spots. Not only could an overseas trip be interpreted as an expression of wealth and elitism, but an international trip could also potentially be viewed as an expression of misplaced cultural loyalties. Further, images of presidents on the golf course or basketball court with campaign benefactors, bankers, politicians and other people in power also

perpetuated the idea that politics was a white man's world and that real political change was affected in masculinized, affluent and sometimes racially segregated social spaces (such as golf or country clubs). This tells us that political journalists were aware of the potentially classed and raced (and sometimes historically racist) connotations of certain sports, vacations and other consumer preferences.

Popular understanding of what was "masculine" behavior and what was "feminine" behavior was changing in this generation. The versions of acceptable masculinity for politicians were transforming as a new generation of political leaders took power from the previous generation. There were, of course, still negotiations of proper masculinities between politicians of varying generations and political parties. However, when Democratic presidents were in office, it was clear that definitions of masculinity were more pliable than ever. In the age of Baby Boomer cultural authority and the mounting influence of Generation-X and Millennials, new understandings of gender as a fluid social construction and masculinity/femininity as a spectrum, were still (and still are) cementing in political culture. This understanding ultimately reinforced the hegemonic political order, but it also questioned and disrupted these ideological assumptions to some extent.

Voters cast their ballots for people and personalities, not policy or legislators. Americans want their presidents to be humanized, likable figures, people who they might trust to coach their kids' baseball teams or would like to have a beer with. The job of political journalism within political culture is to speak truth to this power, but it often seeks to make those in power appear accessible, relatable or likable. Stories from throughout the presidents' lives as sons, husbands, fathers, friends, athletes, masculine

figures and men of leisure and taste help voters feel as though they know who they are voting for, know the kind of person they are bestowing an ineffable amount of power, meaning and influence upon. Each vacation or golf outing or family photo was a paint stroke on the larger presidential portrait, a scene in the ongoing but fragmentary presidential character study. These supposedly revealing scenes from presidents' private lives were premised on the assumption that there was, in fact, an authentic person to be found beneath the countless layers of presidential image design, construction, representation and interpretation. Political news journalists were therefore doubly constrained by the social constructs or conventions of news discourse as well as the somewhat futile, Sisyphean task of uncovering and authenticating the elusive presidential character. These constraints on journalists' abilities to share deep truths about politicians, whether journalists recognize them or not, tell us that the genre of soft political news is potentially rife with speculation, half-truths and extrapolation. This genre surely captures authentic truths sometimes, but these stories likely contribute to the noise and spectacle of the contemporary political media machine just as often.

The focus on authenticity, personality and identity tells us electioneering is really a self-marketing campaign in which politicians must package themselves in universally appealing ways. The concept of politicians as products is not new. However, the metaphor was strikingly salient in the political media climate of the 1990s and 2000s, a period marked by the decline in "hard" news and a concomitant rise in infotainment, political identity manufacturing, advertising spending and target marketing. Policy and professionalism were certainly still large parts of this packaging, but personality, identity and humanity were becoming equally important features. Political culture is inundated

with news images and conversations that portray politicians as interesting, electable personalities. “Soft” political journalism is the arena in which these images are circulated, contested and negotiated. The implications of a political culture laser-focused on the horse race of elections, the hyperreality of image making, and the minutiae of gaffes and personal details demand to be taken seriously. This body of representations, for better or worse, has a tremendous influence on how voters understand the role of politicians’ personalities and identities affect in the legislative process.

Feature or “soft” news stories about US presidents’ private lives can, en masse, have meaningful influences on presidential personae and images. But these stories are not always about what they appear to be on the surface. Feature news of this variety explores important themes and concepts that people can use to comprehend political power and consider the complexities of gender, race, class and self-presentation. Journalists working in this genre of political news use images of the presidents as masculine figures or classed consumers, for example, to determine what it means to be a masculine person or to have upscale tastes in a given historical moment. This is an important topic that calls for more extensive research encompassing a wider variety of news outlets, presidents and facets of private life.

News coverage of presidential private lives and masculinities is an understudied corner of political culture and warrants further research and synthesis. An entire subset of political journalism that eschews policy for personality has come to dwarf other, more seemingly “serious” political discourses and cannot be ignored or trivialized. This project has only scratched the surface of exploring how news media representations of

presidential private lives inform popular imaginings of US presidents as gendered and classed figures. Considering the presidents through the framework Baby Boomer ideas of masculinity is only one doorway through which we can study how changing ideas about gender affect political images and political culture at large. In a time when there appears to be a real possibility of electing a female president, long held ideas about politics and the presidency as inherently masculine demand to be reconsidered.

This project was limited in methods of analysis, presidential subjects and party affiliations, cultural identifiers, facets of private life and the availability of archived news texts. This precludes any sweeping generalizations or conclusions about news media's historical role in fashioning political images beyond the two presidents I studied here. Images of Republican Party members and presidential candidates whose ideologies fall outside traditional binary or oppositional conceptions of politics (such as Libertarians or Green Party politicians) might be a particularly fertile ground for studying gender and physicality in politics. Further research might also consider how historical developments in media technology and culture, most obviously television and Internet, have affected popular images of specific presidents and shaped trends in soft political news.

This genre of political journalism does important cultural work by serving as an avenue for psychoanalyzing and historicizing the presidents. But it can also serve as a public forum for talking about larger cultural concerns surrounding the increasingly complex and sometimes ambiguous politics of identity. As historical documents, feature stories that portray presidents as gendered, classed or raced in some way can help us see how popular ideas about masculinity or consumer taste or presidential identity have developed in new cultural, media and political landscapes. Soft news about presidents'

personal lives, hobbies and tastes may appear more like tabloid fodder or infotainment than serious political commentary, but deeper explication of news texts indicates that this corner of political journalism can be a site for larger ruminations on anxieties about cultural identity as internal, flexible and performative.



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