



Katrine Kielos

This Bud's for you

Ronald Reagan's ability to get working men to vote for policies that were clearly not in their interests casts a long shadow over US politics post 9/11. The crisis of American masculinity is targeted not only by advertising but also by politics. In the US presidential race, winning the masculinity battle will be crucial, writes Katrine Kielos.

The USA has its beginnings in a fairytale of masculinity. The myth of the young hero (George Washington) who leads a rebellion against his evil old father (England), kills him, and in turn becomes the founding father of a new land. Myths of masculinity have always had a large role to play in American politics.

In her book *The Terror Dream -- Fear and Fantasy in Post 9/11 America*, Susan Faludi describes American society as falling back on its old myths of male heroes and female victims following the terror attacks of 2001. Faludi claims that 9/11 hit American culture right in the solar plexus. The reactions were those one would expect of an American trauma going back to the nation's childhood. A trauma about women taken captive by the natives and male shame at not having been able to prevent them being carried off.

Faludi attempts to show that reactions to severe national trauma are written deep in the nation's cultural DNA. Crises and fear lay bare some kind of innate national character. The American reaction to the 2001 terrorist attacks was thus predestined by the USA's own history. What rose from the ruins of the World Trade Center was a primitive myth of masculinity and femininity.

The psychological function of myths is to help people deal with contradictions within culture. Since culture is constantly shifting, the demand for certain myths grows while for others it shrinks. In other words, myths are considerably more complicated than Faludi claims. Particularly myths pertaining to relations between the sexes, which, fraught with contradictions, require a huge number of myths. National myths about masculinity and femininity speak to collective neuroses and fears, but they do not develop in accordance with evolutionary models. Rather, they are strings that can be played on. The question is: who is playing and in whose interests?

In branding theory, emphasis is placed on the importance of positioning one's brand in the so-called "myth market". If a company's marketing succeeds in identifying a contradiction in a culture and presenting its product as a solution to this contradiction, then consumption of that product will appear to people to be a simple way of solving their problems. Sales will rise; the shareholders will be happy.

Budweiser is a product that has succeeded in making itself into something of an American institution, both politically and culturally, precisely by playing on myths of American masculinity. Its recipe for success is to constantly change to keep in step with American society, and to use the myths generated by the brand itself to make American men conform to such images of masculinity.

By drinking Budweiser in the 1950s, American men could sign up to the all-American dream of an all-American house in an all-American suburb with an all-American family. Budweiser was part of this lifestyle; the myth exploited by the beer advertisements was that of a specifically American form of thoroughgoing, dependable masculinity. You could buy it bottled. It was easy to become part of it.

Myths do not develop through culture. Instead, new myths substitute old ones to provide answers to new contradictions that arise when preconditions change. This was the case with American masculinity and this was the case with Budweiser.

All advertisements that play on cultural myths encounter problems when culture is undergoing extensive changes. In the late 1960s, Budweiser, like most other traditional American institutions, ran into major difficulties. The myth of the good American man — who calls out "Honey I'm home", opens a Bud and sits down on the sofa with his American wife and children to watch the President address the nation on television — began to clash with an altered reality.

Large-scale protest marches and race riots in US cities alerted the nation to the situation of black people. Japanese businesses began outperforming American ones. The American man may have had an image of himself as a cog in the industrial machine — but at least he was a cog in the American, world-leading, industrial machine. Now his identity could no longer be built on that proud boast. So why was he working himself to death in the factory day after day?

The Arab oil cartel revealed that the economic power of the USA was not as invincible as the man in the factory had been told. The Vietnam War showed that the Pentagon's high-tech war toys were not as invincible as the man who was expected to use them had been told. Watergate showed that the political system the man was expected to respect and obey was corrupt.

The American masculinity upon whose back Budweiser had sold so many beers had been built on the concept of a dependable American empire. Once that was called into question, masculinity, too, was called into question. Even American women seemed dissatisfied. They were reading Betty Friedan, throwing away their bras and leaving home in search of something else. Men, especially on the east and west coasts, gave up the whole masculinity thing and joined the cultural revolution instead. Nobody was drinking Budweiser there.

Meanwhile, Mid-America's ideal of masculinity began to move in the opposite direction. Among those white, working-class men for whom a radical hippie lifestyle was neither possible nor tempting, among those termed by Richard Nixon "the silent majority", the crisis of masculinity hit harder.

Everything that American working class men had been taught to relate to seemed to be collapsing. There were question marks hanging over the war machine, over the industrial machine, and over the role of women. Working

class men, those affected most by concerns about the industrial sector, started to feel that the USA had become feminised. Large numbers of them began looking for confirmation of this feeling and the beer-marketing departments were not slow to respond.

In almost all beer commercials of that time, emphasis shifted from the middle-class man to his working-class counterpart. The beer industry began to target the marketing of its products directly at the American man who had returned from Vietnam or clawed his way out of economic problems. Budweiser started calling itself the "King of Beers" and deploying precisely the myth for which demand was greatest: the myth of the man who returns home a king. Not a customer, nor a labourer, nor a white-collar worker, nor a shot-up war veteran with erection problems and nightmares, nor an equal partner in some new era of free sex and drugs broadly emanating from a middle-class identity. No, a king!

When the military and big business seemed to be betraying the ideal of masculinity on which the American working-class man had learnt to base his identity, Budweiser stepped forward. Budweiser was still an American institution you could depend on, oh yes! With relief, American men opened another beer.

In the late 1970s, it all collapsed again. Inflation rates in the USA went into double figures, a deep recession followed and unemployment exploded. Japanese industry celebrated fresh triumphs, which the USA perceived as a humiliation. As it did the long delay in releasing the hostages from the Iranian embassy.

Cultural tensions increased among those men who had been hit hardest by the economic crisis. Their sense of powerlessness and of losing control generated a demand for something to explain this identity crisis and to create a new sense of meaning. This time, however, it was not just Budweiser and other companies who rose to the challenge, but also politics. Ronald Reagan entered the scene with a conscious strategy of reaching the American working classes through this very crisis of masculinity.

In 1980, Richard Wirthlin, Reagan's head strategy adviser, made a discovery that fundamentally changed American politics. Wirthlin was a public opinion analyst and as such he had been trained to believe that people vote for candidates on the basis of candidates' stance on issues. When the first opinion polls of Reagan showed that people who did not share Reagan's views at all — and were fully aware of it — still wanted to vote for him, Wirthlin began to study the phenomenon more closely.

It emerged that what tipped the balance was the fact that people identified with Reagan. Identification is the result of a variety of factors, but in Reagan's case the most important of these was his ability to personify a new masculinity. Reagan's image was of a man of action, doing battle against evil: Muammar Gaddafi, Manuel Noriega, the Sandinistas, the Soviet Union.

What is interesting is not the fact that Reagan played on the myth of masculinity; all politicians have to do that. (Female candidates perhaps most of all, as they must constantly juggle with the impossible paradox: how to appear tough enough, but not too tough?) Of far greater interest is the fact that this led to a historic shift in patterns of voter behaviour. Working-class men, many of them life-long Democrats, changed party to support what they perceived as

Ronald Reagan's exhortation to restore American masculinity, and with it the USA as a nation.

Ronald Reagan, like John F. Kennedy, played consciously on the prevailing Hollywood ideal of masculinity. But where Kennedy turned masculinity to represent a strong society, co-operation across bloc boundaries, investment in science, and to harness collective efforts to put a man on the moon, Reagan sent the myth off in other directions.

Reagan made himself the independent hero. The solitary hero, intrepidly resisting authority. In order to create a new identity and render itself still useful, American masculinity needed a new enemy. Something to go out and do battle with. Reagan produced such an enemy. Authority was defined as the public sector; Reagan promised to lead the battle and restore American masculinity, which had been feminised and nannied by an over-large, over-protective state.

The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the government and I'm here to help.

Working with skilful political strategists, Ronald Reagan succeeded in pairing the American masculinity myth with the prevailing neoliberal ideology of the time. From Reagan's speeches about "The New Goldrush", middle-class men extracted a new identity in which masculinity meant competition to be the one earning most money on Wall Street, in the Texas oil industry, or the expanding Silicon Valley.

For their part, the working-class men of the silent majority were told of the new economic war in which everyone was needed to defend the USA against Japan once more. All the jobs that were disappearing abroad were skilfully transformed by Reagan from a potential problem into a political resource. This wasn't the USA letting the workers down: this was Pearl Harbor! It was the Japanese! This was a war between two states, not the result of failed economic policy!

American men needed to believe in a USA where their labour was needed, and they heeded Reagan and Lee Iacocca's calls on them to sacrifice themselves for their country in the factories. With its customary intuitive flair, Budweiser highlighted exactly the same myth in its campaigns:

To everyone who puts in a hard day's work, this Bud's for you.
/ There's no one else who does it quite the way you do. / So
here's to you. / You know it isn't what you say, it's what you
do. / For all you do, the king of beers is coming through.

The Budweiser commercials of the Reagan years addressed men's collective need to carry on feeling useful in an economic reality in which traditional male jobs (whatever the President's rhetoric implied) were losing their importance at a rapid pace.

You keep America going / You keep the juices flowing / You
are muscle, the hope and the hustle / You keep the country
growing.

Faludi refers to the way stories of brave men immediately started to develop on the morning of 12 September 2001. And that was certainly the case. The media

began hunting out male heroes where there were no real heroes to be found. A country paralysed by post-traumatic stress syndrome acted out a fantasy with props from American history and mythology.

"Heroes were needed, so heroes were made," Bruce Springsteen sings on his latest album. Like Faludi, Springsteen attempts to get to grips with the American reaction to "9/11" and the way it deformed the event itself. The difference is that in Springsteen's tale, unlike Faludi's, there is a magician who deliberately prompts the people into certain feelings and actions. And indeed, the dramatic staging Faludi describes, into which the events of 11 September 2001 were swiftly moulded, could equally well be explained in terms of the Right's swift introduction of the cognitive political framework of the "War on terror".

A shocked USA watched the images of the collapsing towers. No one had ever seen anything like it. Collective psychology strained desperately for a definition. Something to provide an answer to the question: What is this? The Republicans were first off the starting blocks, and were soon talking of a "war on terror", a campaign against terrorism. The USA readily swallowed the concept around which American politics has revolved ever since.

"War on terror" is a political definition in every respect. War is by definition a national problem. If you are at war, you attack other states. It is implied in the very word. A war cannot be solved by police intervention; that too is implied in the word. It followed that the country got a "war president", as the Republicans began calling George W. Bush. All of a sudden he possessed not just ordinary powers but "war powers", which definitely sounds like promotion. A mandate to adopt extraordinary measures.

When the USA accepted the term "war on terror", it locked itself into a particular debate and particular, specific, political solutions.

If a country accepts that it is at war, old myths about men's and women's roles will be activated. We have learnt to understand war as a particular kind of dramatic staging in which the man is the hero and the woman the one to be rescued. This was the script the USA began to act out, the one described by Susan Faludi.

It was not, however, a piece of theatre following some primitive American narrative, but rather a collective psychological reaction to the American Right's introduction of the concept "War on terror". There is no need for primitive narratives when the Republicans have had twenty years to hone their skill in playing on American myths of masculinity. Karl Rove and Frank Luntz are all it takes.

Ronald Reagan succeeded in combining the American masculinity myth with a neo-liberal agenda. The historical shift in voting patterns that resulted led the very groups who had most to lose by Reagan's economic policies to vote for him. Myths have enormous power, particularly when they are directed at groups struggling with identity problems. Similarly, George W. Bush managed to combine the American masculinity myth with a war agenda. The very groups who risked losing their children in the senseless violence on the other side of the globe were the strongest supporters of the war.

In the presidential elections of 2004, the Democrats spent more time trying to portray John Kerry as a manly war hero than articulating a clear alternative to

George W. Bush's policy in Iraq. In this year's presidential elections, one may hope that the Democrats will realise that masculinity is a political factor at a far deeper level than that. If progressive forces in the USA are to break the shift in voter behaviour achieved by Reagan, they must contemplate how their own political alternative could have let down the American working class man so badly.

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