COURAGE, LEADERSHIP AND APPEARANCE: DEFINING MASCULINITY IN THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 1960

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In June of 1960, Robert Kennedy headed to Texas to talk politics. John F. Kennedy (called "Jack" by his friends) just solidified his nomination as presidential candidate for the Democratic Party, and Richard Nixon had already begun general election campaigning. On behalf of his brother, Robert Kennedy went to Lyndon Johnson's Texas ranch to discuss whether Johnson was going to run with Jack on the Democratic ticket. Johnson took Robert deer hunting during his stay on the ranch. After Robert's first shot, he was knocked to the ground, blood pouring from above his eyebrow, because he lost control of the gun due to recoil. Johnson looked down at the injured Kennedy and said "Son, you've got to learn to handle a gun like a man." After Robert tended to the open wound on his forehead, he notified Jack of what had happened. At this moment the Kennedy brothers realized that Johnson loathed their effeminate, aristocratic ways and nearly declined Jack's offer to serve as his running mate. The Democratic Party had expressed concern that Jack could not relate to ordinary people, and that he would not be able to appear masculine enough to voters. Many members of the Democratic Party feared that if Kennedy's masculinity were questioned, he would be forced to walk away with something much worse than a gash on the

forehead and the Democrats, once again, would be licking their wounds.[1]

Masculinity has had a significant role in American political culture. Politicians have run their campaigns and their administrations on different philosophies of manhood. Soft and hard masculinity are two different ways in which manhood has been expressed in the political arena. Soft masculinity might be visible in a candidate's proclivity for diplomacy, passivity, intelligence, domesticity, or morality. Hard masculinity includes traits such as strength, toughness, and action.

This sense of hard masculinity at the beginning of the 1960s was a result of World War II. The male body seemed to excrete sheer force and it had become synonymous with wartime soldiers. Men were tall and had muscles that put Atlas to shame.[2] The idea of strong bodies carried into the Cold War era as the threat of Communism reinforced toughness especially in politics. Eisenhower's victory in 1952 was due to his established military record. He had been a political favorite for both parties and among the people. His Democratic opponent in the presidential election of 1952 and 1956, Adlai Stevenson, lost in part because his poetic and flamboyant nature was perceived as a threat to the hard masculinity that was necessary to fight Communists. Stevenson had become a sign of weakness. In 1960 Democrats seemed to be associated with a new flamboyant image that they had to reshape if they wanted to prove that they had the ability to fight Communism.[3] In the election of 1960, Kennedy was able to reorganize the ideals of the Democrats and mold them into a new plan of action with a new toughness. Liberals were not afraid of Communists and they were not afraid of political power in the executive branch. Democrats attacked Eisenhower and the GOP for bureaucratizing the federal government and criticized his alleged fear of power.[4]

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[1] Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy 1917-1963* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2003), 269.

[2] Christina S. Jarvis, "Building the Body Politic for the Depression to World War II," *The Male Body at War: American Masculinity During World War II* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University, 2004), 10-55.

[3] K.A. Courdileone, "Anti- Communism on the Right," *Manhood and the American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 88-96.

[4] Courdileone, "Reinventing the American Liberal," *Manhood and the American Political Culture in the Cold War*, 201-220.

Masculinity changed in the 1960 election to a more liberal mindset. Kennedy offered the American public a new breed of masculinity by blending soft and hard manhood into a young, charismatic, kind person, who could fight, and knew how to express a sense of "ballsiness" to the public.[5] The election of 1960 reveals two feuding views of manhood: Kennedy, and his advocacy of the new "Cold War Warrior," and Nixon who was trying to maintain the masculine political culture of the 1950's. Scholars often ignore Nixon's embodiment of masculinity during the election and instead focus on Kennedy.

In the race for president, Nixon and Kennedy debated foreign and domestic policy but the way each candidate connected his views to ideas about masculinity became of central importance during the campaign. Kennedy had to overcome the stereotypical, liberal image that many associated with the Democratic Party. Kennedy branded himself as a "new liberal," a man of action, and of courage. He appeared strong, as he expressed a new cool, charismatic style of leadership that seemed to project a new vitality to the nation. Nixon's masculinity, on the other hand, was much more rigid. He campaigned based on the notion that new was not necessarily better. Nixon used his experience in the executive branch, leadership abilities, and ties to Eisenhower to express his masculinity to the voters. As the two men defined their manhood in different ways, debates emerged about who was qualified to take the position of the next Commander in Chief.

By May 1960 Kennedy solidified enough votes to win his party's nomination. Nixon's nomination for the Republican Party was already known by early 1960. He would be the heir to the Eisenhower legacy and run a campaign focusing on the strong foreign policy that the administration had enacted, which still had widespread support. Kennedy would focus more on domestic issues, especially civil rights.

Nixon's selected running mate was Henry Cabot Lodge. He was an Eisenhower appointee to the United Nations. This choice represented Nixon's close ties to the Eisenhower administration. The Nixon-Lodge ticket entered into the race against the Kennedy-Johnson. Even though the Kennedy brothers and Lyndon Johnson were notorious for feuding on a personal level, the balance between the JFK and Johnson was politically an ideal match. Johnson was Protestant and southern which would gain much needed southern

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[5] Ibid.

support for the northern-bred candidate. Nixon recognized how perfect the match was, commenting that, the "Kennedy-Johnson ticket would be ideally balanced in age, experience, region, and religion. It might be an uneasy and joyless marriage of convenience, but it ... would unite the party by assuring Southern conservative support even though the ticket was headed by a Northern liberal."[6]

Once the two parties had officially chosen their candidates, Nixon announced that his campaign trail would reach all fifty states. Kennedy's health limited his physical and mental energy, making it very difficult for him to match Nixon's promise to visit every state in the Union. Still, his campaign hit every major city in the United States and concentrated on the New England area. Although his health posed an issue, Kennedy managed to bring his campaign to over forty states, while focusing on twenty-four swing states.

For most of the race, Nixon and Kennedy were evenly matched in different aspects of their campaign and failed to win over the majority of Americans. Nixon attacked Kennedy's youth and inexperience, and Kennedy attacked the Eisenhower administration. The attacks on both sides neutralized one another. In September of 1960, Kennedy challenged Nixon to a series of debates, which Nixon accepted. The first debate in September focused on foreign affairs. Nixon's rigorous campaigning of the fifty states left a toll on him. He developed a fever and an infected knee left him looking tired, sickly, and hideously underweight during the first debate. Kennedy, on the other hand, looked his best. His charismatic nature worked well on television and viewers deemed him the winner of the debate. On the other hand, the press and viewers saw Nixon as unkempt and weak. Despite Kennedy's successes, the four televised debates did little to sway voters. There was nearly no change in the gallop polls for either of the candidates as Election Day neared.

The public personas of the two men became a major point of interest in the election. Both men were forced to make changes in the early months of the campaign. Nixon had to ditch what was known as the "Herblock Image" that he unwillingly adopted during his eight years in office. Herb Block, a political cartoonist, rose to fame with his drawings of Nixon. The Herblock Image was crucial to Nixon and his appearance because it became synonymously linked to the tired, square-headed, slumped-over cartoon character. In many of the

[6] Nixon, *RN: The Memoir of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 215.

infamous Herb Block cartoons, Nixon's shirt was drawn as unkempt and sweat poured off of his face. Nixon's opponents utilized the Herblock image to create an emasculated picture of Nixon. These drawing were emasculating because it depicted the presidential candidate as unable, weak and nervous because of the pressures of work. Nixon's team managed to steer away from the Herblock image early in the campaign. Commercials aired that depicted a strong Nixon whose awkward charm and dry sense of humor made him the favorite at the start of 1960.

The change in Kennedy's image was much more distinct than Nixon's and longer lasting. However, he struggled with altering his character rather than his physical appearance. His peers recalled him as a thinker who had trouble being personable, especially when it came to discussing policy and business. Thus the presidential candidate focused on becoming more likable. Kennedy's envisioned persona would eliminate the technical, business-like aspects of his personality that alienated people from him. Early in the campaign, a writer from *Vogue* magazine described him as "a serious driven man, about as casual as a cash register, who enjoys the organizational, technical part of politics but not the stumping."[7] A few short months after Kennedy began his transformation observers noted that "It is hard to recognize in the relaxed, smiling, and confident Kennedy ... the serious man who ... in July ... seemed all cold efficiency, all business."[8] Kennedy also began to sell himself as a family man to offset the notion that he was too young to take his job seriously. He was able to shake the image by emphasizing his role as a father and husband. With his wife, Jackie by his side, he reshaped his image into a serious, committed husband, father and politician.

During the campaign Nixon defined himself as a leader, continuously reminding voters that a leader should have, "sound and sober judgment, a man who in a crisis will be cool, a man who won't go off half-cooked, a man who will resist temptation."[9] The man in charge "must also have the courage to take firm and clear positions on great issues of our time." For Nixon, courage was an essential aspect of leadership. A leader must be able to take the reins, and make a

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[7] "People are Talking About...,"*Vogue*, March 1960, 94.
[8] Dallek, 293-294.
[9] Richard Nixon, "Politics and Leadership," in *The Challenges We Face: Edited and Compiled from the Speeches and Papers of Richard M. Nixon* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Comp., 1961), 137.

decision and stand by what he does. A courageous leader must be able to think outside of the box and develop answers to the many problems. A leader that can offer "constructive, creative leadership" must occupy the presidency.[10]

Intelligence became another important factor in Nixon's vision of effective leadership. He understood that intelligence and creativity must work together to solve problems. To have the ability to create policy was not enough; a true leader had to have the ability to manufacture the best policy for the people. A leader needed the abstract ideas of creativity, experience, intelligence, courage, and level-headedness to come together to lead the United States into the next decade.

Nixon's focus on the many dimensions of leadership fell into the realm of experience. He argued that foolishly running into the unknown was not leadership. Only prior experience could steer the nation. Nixon created a direct link between strong leadership and experience. Experience had now become a necessary condition for masculinity in politics. Nixon's campaign benefited from the knowledge he had acquired during the eight years as Eisenhower's vice president. His wealth of experience allowed him to argue that, "We need seasoned and practical leaders."[11] His experience was advantageous and Kennedy was forced to justify his inexperience as beneficial to the presidency.

Kennedy argued that experience was not a critical part of leadership but, instead courage was more important. For Kennedy, the country needed a young man who was willing to take chances to produce change, which was courageous. Kennedy outlined his definition of courage, "My call is to the young at heart, regardless of age — to the stout in spirit, regardless of party — to all who respond to the spiritual call: 'Be strong and of good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed.'"[12] Courage became the main component of masculinity for Kennedy's campaign. Like Nixon's concept of leadership, courage was a complex idea that defined masculinity. Kennedy argued that courage was to follow one's morals in order to make a decision. Those who had courage had the ability to care for the

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[10] Ibid., 139.
[11] Ibid., 132.
[12] John F. Kennedy, "The Opening of the New Frontier," *"Let the word go forth": The Speeches, Statements, and Writings of John F. Kennedy*, ed. Theodore C. Sorensen (New York: Delacorte Press, 1988), 100-101.

welfare of the people. Kennedy defined himself as "someone who looks ahead and not behind, someone who cares for the welfare of the people."[13] In Kennedy's acceptance speech for the Democratic nomination, he promised to lead the party back to greatness and victory.[14] Kennedy also projected that he had faith in the people.

Kennedy also felt that moral guidance was an important aspect of courage. In *Profiles in Courage*, Kennedy wrote of men who stuck to their principals and saw them to the end despite, "the pressures, the temptations of false compromises."[15] Kennedy argued that he was able to stick to his principles and bring "courage, not complacency," to the American presidency.[16]

Kennedy claimed that the man elected to office should be a skilled diplomat who would enter into discussions before acting. Kennedy suggested that his experience as a Senator had trained him in diplomacy and this experience made him the right person for the presidency.[17] Diplomacy was of a major concern for voters because tensions with the Soviet Union remained high.

In his speech, "Definition of a Liberal," Kennedy redefined what it meant to be a liberal and argued that it was someone who saw that the welfare of people all over the world had been compromised as freedom battled against Communism. He proclaimed that a "'Liberal' [is] ... someone who looks ahead and not behind, someone who welcomes new ideas without rigid reactions, someone who cares about the welfare of the people...." A liberal was the "source of national action and the advocate for "justice and freedom ... which all human life deserves."[18] With the United States and the Soviet Union operating as duel world powers, toughness and strength were important characteristics for the future president to possess. He was seen as the defender the free world. In San Francisco, he noted that, "it takes a stronger America, militarily, economically, and educationally."[19] Using terms such as strength and toughness helped voters to believe his promise to maintain peace.

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[13] Kennedy, "The Definition of a Liberal," in *"Let the World Go Forth,"* 106.
[14] Kennedy, "The Opening of the New Frontier," 96.
[15] Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 11.
[16] Kennedy, "The Opening of the New Frontier," 101.
[17] Kennedy, *Profiles,* 5.
[18] Kennedy, "The Definition of a Liberal," 106.
[19] Kennedy, "The Issue of Peace," *"Let the World Go Forth,* 118.

Nixon had trouble not to appear overly aggressive in his stance towards Communism. Nixon's call for vigor against Communism made him the man to keep, "our country strong, our people prosperous and the world at peace."[20] The beginning of his campaign started well with commercials discussing his potency against Communism. He proclaimed in commercials that he was the candidate to show "firmness and strength ... we are strong economically and militarily, [and] we will not be coerced." He believed that "We must continue to deal with Communism and Soviet leaders, not belligerently, but firmly and with vigilance."[21] As the campaign went on, Nixon became more aggressive in his language arguing that, "the United States will do what is necessary to maintain the strength we need. The greater danger, in my view, is nonmilitary in character."[22] Many took this statement as a subtle proclamation of war. Nixon also stated that in order to keep the United States in a position of "domination" he would be willing to go to war.[23] Not only did Nixon appear aggressive but he also charged that Kennedy "'would be a very dangerous President, dangerous to the cause of peace and dangerous from the standpoint of surrender.'"[24] Nixon felt that Kennedy was too weak on his stance towards Communism. He assumed that because of Kennedy's inexperience with diplomacy, the young northerner stood no chance against Soviet threats.

Kennedy attacked Nixon for his extreme aggression and his lack of action during his two terms as vice president. In response to Nixon's criticisms, Kennedy announced that American voters should avoid the GOP nominee because, "the generation which he speaks for has seen enough warmongers."[25] Kennedy in effect compared Nixon to Stalin (who forcefully occupied most of Eastern Europe), Hitler (who fought a war for world domination), Mussolini (who had been Hitler's ally during World War II), and Emperor Hirohito (who led Japan during the Chinese invasion in the early 1930s). Also according to Kennedy, Nixon proclaimed that he was a man of action, but as vice-president he had done nothing to fight Communists. Kennedy charged that Eisenhower, "set up new machinery intended to win the

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[20] Nixon, "Politics," 134.
[21] Richard Nixon Campaign, "Nixon: Peace," Television advertisement, 1960.
[22] Nixon, "The Soviet Challenge," 23.
[23] Ibid., 29.
[24] Dallek, 290.
[25] Kennedy, "The Issue of Peace," 118.

struggle for peace and freedom. But it turned out to be nothing more than a series of conferences, committees and goodwill tours."[26] Kennedy also asserted that the toughness of the former military man had been lost in paperwork and bureaucracy.

Political cartoons in print media often questioned Nixon's trustworthiness based on his appearance. One particular drawing which was published in October 1960 was titled "Would You Buy a Used Car from This Man?" The drawing of Nixon was a simple mug shot with sweat poring down his face, a five o'clock shadow, bushy eyebrows, a Pinocchio nose, and no eyes.[27] Each of these characteristics attacked Nixon's trustworthiness. The Pinocchio nose implied that he was a liar and his missing eyes showed that it was impossible to see if he was telling the truth. The main idea of the cartoon was based on the presumption that everyone knew that a used car salesman could not be trusted. Another cartoon of Nixon reinforced the image of his untrustworthiness. It shows him staring into the Republican Mirror, dressed as a witch and seeking the answers to who is the fairest one of all."[28] Potions, caldrons, bones, and a poison apple surround Nixon as he diabolically gazes into the mirror. This cartoon reminded voters that Nixon would do *anything* to get into the White House.

These cartoon images and Nixon's unflattering, tired appearance during the debates were damaging because they attacked his character, specifically, his honesty and strength. During a television debate, he was described as "chalky and gaunt, seemed restless, clearly under strain."[29] The press even stated that his body language appeared shifty, and untrustworthy. A reporter added that, "He shuffled his feet under his chair, his hands fidgeted, his eyes darted about, his lips glistened with perspiration... [and] erupted into what appeared to be a smile he did not feel."[30] Nixon's strength became problematic throughout the entire first debate. Nixon had created a weak image on national television. In a last attempt to redeem himself, Nixon jabbed his finger into Senator Kennedy's chest

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[26] Ibid., 117.

[27] Herbert Block, "Would You Buy A Used Car From This Man? http://www.english.ucla.edu/1960s/6263/randazzo.htm (accessed May 3, 2008)

[28] Herbert Block, "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall Who's the Fairest One of All?" *Washington Post,* January 1, 1960, http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/swann/herblock/ images/s03495u.jpg (accessed April 26, 2008).

[29] Editorials, *New York Times*, September 28, 1960.

[30] Ibid.

during a photo (in hopes of his other arm blocking his actions) in an attempt to make Kennedy cower. This backfired on the vice president as it made Nixon look like a bully.[31]

Even though the press had a field day unraveling the image of Nixon after the debates, Kennedy attacked Nixon's trustworthiness from the beginning. During Kennedy's acceptance speech for the presidential nomination, he stated,

> We know that it will not be easy to campaign against a man who has spoken or voted on every known side of every known issue [and even though] Mr. Nixon may feel it is his turn now, after the New Deal and the Fair Deal - but before he deals, someone had better cut the cards.[32]

Kennedy insinuated that Nixon was a cheater and no one could possibly know how he would vote, and if he won, it might be due to manipulating the election.

Kennedy's image during the debates and his rapport with the press enabled him to create an image of strength. This image showed he was ready for the pressures of executive duty. Constantly aware of his public image, Kennedy accepted professional make up which made him look well rested, thus projecting to his constituents the picture of a calm diplomat. Editors commented that, “Mr. Kennedy appeared somber, but composed, alert but relaxed, with one leg over the other.” Reporters noted Kennedy’s composition, arguing that it was the strength of his campaign. One reporter wrote that “Mr. Kennedy... was four years younger and was relaxed rested and well briefed.” The remark “four years younger” really tried to paint the picture of a young Kennedy as opposed to Nixon who was seen as part of the aged and decrepit even though he was born in 1913, and Kennedy in 1917. Kennedy's age did play a significant role in the election. He became the young, vigorous candidate to some, and the inexperienced youth to others.[33]

Nixon commented several times on Kennedy's appearance during the campaign. As Nixon reflected back on the election in his memoirs, he recalled that he “considered Kennedy's biggest assets to

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[31] Dallek, 285.
[32] Kennedy, “The Opening,” 98.
[33] Editorials, *New York Times*, September 28, 1960.

be his wealth and the appeal of his personal style."[34] Nixon lamented that appearances were becoming a big problem in determining leadership. He urged "those who are examining this problem of leadership not to be fooled by appearances that they look beyond gestures and flamboyant speeches to what is actually accomplished."[35]

For a man that was loathed by Republicans and questioned by Democrats, Kennedy's victory became a turning point in politics. Kennedy redefined liberalism and he made the Democratic Party synonymous with courage, strength and action. Nixon's leadership and experience were not enough to elect another Republican to four years as president in the White House. He had stumbled over his appearance as Kennedy strolled to victory. The election of 1960 was pivotal because appearance became a major determinant in voting for president. Luckily, Kennedy did not have to go hunting to prove his manhood and to be elected to the highest office of the nation.

[34] Nixon, *RN*, 214.
[35] Nixon, "Politics," 137.