

JULY 22

Macho politics and major consequences

With two words, the governor of California has managed to highlight the confluence of anti-gay bias and misogyny. Open contempt for “girlie men” would have raised fewer eyebrows in the past. Reactions to Arnold Schwarzenegger’s put-down of Democrats in the state legislature – “if they don’t have the guts, I call them girlie men” – tell us a lot about how far we’ve come. The good news is the media outcry; the bad news is that the outcry hasn’t been stronger.

As a rough gauge of media progress on gender-related issues, consider two editorials that appeared – 88 years apart – in the same newspaper.

About 10 months before the United States entered World War I, the writer Upton Sinclair aimed some barbs at flag-waving militarism when he spoke to the elite Friday Morning Club of Los Angeles. “I promised my wife I would get a haircut before I came here,” he said, “but I almost missed it, because there were so many red and white decorations on the streets that I couldn’t find a barbershop.”

The Los Angeles Times quickly published an editorial (headlined “Upton Sinclair’s Ravings”) charging that his sense of humor “demanded that he belittle the flag of the United States, and, after pretending to confuse it with a barber’s pole scoff at the great national wave of emotion for the country’s righteous defense and honor.”

According to the editorial, Sinclair’s words came “from the lips of an effeminate young man with a fatuous smile, a weak chin and a sloping forehead, talking in a false treble” – and the only reason Sinclair got away with it was that he was speaking to a bunch of women. The newspaper contended: “Never before an audience of red-blooded men could Upton Sinclair have voiced his weak, pernicious, vicious doctrines. His naive, fatuous smile alone would have aroused their ire before he opened his vainglorious mouth. Let the fact remain that this slim, befanned example of perverted masculinity could and did get several hundred women to listen to him.”

Fast forward from 1916 to 2004. Days after Gov. Schwarzenegger’s slam at “girlie men” lawmakers, the Los Angeles Times editorialized: “Relative manliness is certainly

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a ridiculous way to evaluate political leaders. It would be ridiculous even if it weren't insulting to all women, especially women in politics."

It's not quite a coincidence that Schwarzenegger is a habitual war enthusiast. Soon after the invasion of Iraq, as part of his media posturing in the months before he ran for governor, the actor flew to Iraq with the help of the Bush administration so he could speak to assembled U.S. troops. Clueless to the galaxies separating his Hollywood phoniness from real war, Schwarzenegger recited lines from movie scripts.

Disdain toward females and gay people is often found in the same psychological bundle as enthusiasm for war. And epithets along the lines of "girlie men" have long been part of pro-war verbiage, whether in private conversations or in media.

When many Americans were vocally opposing the Vietnam War, journalists and pundits often accused them of failing to adhere to the straight-and-narrow. During the 1968 Democratic National Convention, while police beat up anti-war protesters in the streets of Chicago, the conservative icon William F. Buckley could not contain his rage. Buckley was not angry at the police (whose violence he fully supported) but at fellow ABC television commentator Gore Vidal, who had responded to Buckley's defense of the cops by calling him a "pro crypto Nazi."

Buckley, the great right-wing intellectual, replied on the air: "Now listen, you queer. Stop calling me a 'pro crypto Nazi' or I'll sock you in the goddamn face."

In 1970 a U.S. attorney, who was prosecuting the Chicago Seven activists in connection with the convention protests, let slip a great fear when he spoke at a parochial high school: "We've lost our kids to the freaking fag revolution."

Soon after the Gulf War ended, the media hero Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf offered this analysis in May 1991: "After Vietnam we had a cottage industry developed in Washington, D.C., consisting of a bunch of military fairies that had never been shot at in anger [and] who felt fully qualified to comment on the leadership abilities of all the leaders of the U.S. Army."

Denunciation of "fairies" was part of the general's pitch that encouraged unwavering public support for war. "Finally, and most importantly," Schwarzkopf said, "to the great American people: The prophets of doom, the naysayers, the protesters, and the flag burners all said that you would never stick by us. But we knew better. We knew you would never let us down. By golly, you didn't."

Of course plenty of gay men are inclined to be reliably pro-war, and the same goes for lots of "feminists." But in general, white-knuckle commitment to rigid gender roles and (overt or furtive) contempt for women are outlooks apt to be notably compatible with the warfare state. There's no shortage of government officials who think they're

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being laudably tough while they smother human empathy. When office holders cut social services, build more prisons, approve sky-high military budgets or provide a green light for a murderous war, maybe no one will call them "girlie men."

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