

## Johnny Gets His Gun

Previous columns in this series have commented on the tight grip which the military-industrial complex has on American popular culture. As 2023 begins, it's time to ask why this is so, and what the peace movement can do about it. At stake is the movement's ability to reach, convince, and mobilize the general public, bring about constructive change in American military-diplomatic policy, and put the nation on the road to nuclear disarmament. What follows is a series of suggestions and guesses, offered as a rough hypothesis.

Back in the 1950s, there were frequent complaints about the feminization and sissification of American boys. The United States was fresh out of a spectacular victory in World War II, which is still seen as the good war, largely because it took young men who had been cast adrift by the Depression, set them to something useful, and enabled them to see themselves both as providers for themselves and their loved ones and protectors and rescuers of their country. As Richard Reeves argues in his book, *Of Boys and Men*, those roles as provider and protector are essential to the definition of manhood. And so, the draft and military service came to be seen as the way to turn boys into self-respecting men.

Circumstances have changed since then, but the military remains among the most trusted American institutions. While the draft itself no longer operates, young males are still required to register for selective service when they turn 18. That registration is explicitly described as a passage to responsible manhood. Though the risk of arrest is extremely slight, the maximum penalty for evading or defying registration is more severe than it was while the draft did its work.

Starting in the late 1960s, as American warfare became increasingly ambiguous and inconclusive, decently paid jobs in manufacturing began to move overseas, to be replaced by less well compensated, low-wage service work. Automation also altered the American workplace, with the result that most of the manufacturing jobs which were left in the United States were tied to military contractors. Along with the dead end for fossil fuel occasioned by recent decades' global warming, these changes created a still-existent crisis for non-college educated men, who could no longer count on their ability to make ends meet. The ongoing result among them has been an increasing incidence of despair and maladaptive behavior. As early as the 1970s, the disco tune *Stayin' Alive* and the movie *The Deer Hunter* were making the point, followed by Bruce Springsteen's hits, *Born in the USA* and *Glory Days*.

At the same time, women were making long-overdue though still incomplete advances against sexism and in educational and occupational attainment. Today, three out of five college students are female, while the earnings of non-college educated black men are only 84 percent those of college-educated women. A major reason why women's overall earnings still lag behind men's is the time they take off to raise children.

Despite the persistence of sexism in American life, it should come as no surprise that non-college educated men-especially white men-snort when the feminist and civil rights movements tell them they are a privileged class. All they see around them is a dead-end future and the inability to earn the respect and admiration of women they wish to be their companions.

There is another, developmental dimension to the problem. Bluntly put, girls grow up faster than boys. They enter puberty earlier, and their brain development is more advanced. The gap is especially wide when they pass from middle school to high school, just at the point when they face an explicit demand to grow up. For teenage boys whose sense of manhood is immature and who fear humiliation, this is embarrassing. Quite often, the embarrassment continues into adulthood, expressing itself in mass shootings and the rage we currently see in American politics.

Although the peace movement succeeded in ending the quantitative nuclear arms race in the 1980s and 1990s, a qualitative arms race replaced it and is now especially dangerous. And though US militarism may have slipped for awhile, it soon regained its footing. An easy victory in the 1991 Gulf War and 9/11 put it back on solid ground.

And so militarism in our country continues to command respect and to seduce. The allure comes at little overt cost to the American public, since the draft is currently dormant. The military-industrial complex advertises itself as a program for well-compensated work and insinuates itself into every congressional district. Never mind that investment in education, clean energy, healthcare, affordable housing, and infrastructure could provide twice as much such work. The armed forces offer themselves as the path to manhood, and post signs which read, "We're hiring!" Get your weapon, learn to use it, and be a man. Sign up, and you too can secure your place as provider and protector, whose courage rises with danger. The women you meet will love you for it. So the message goes, and it successfully propositions male and female alike.

What can the peace movement do about it? The next column in this series will attempt some suggestions.

For those who wish to explore the issue more deeply and come up with better ideas than this piece has offered, take a look at Richard Reeves' *Of Boys and Men*, Paul Chappell's *Will War Ever End?*, Gore Vidal's *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*, Betty Reardon's *Sexism and the War System*, Seymour Melman's *The Demilitarized Society*, economic data from the National Priorities Project and Brown University's Cost of War Project, and Aarne Vesilind's *Peace Engineering*. Full disclosure: the late Prof. Vesilind, who taught civil engineering at Duke and Lehigh, was a personal friend. Thanks also to peace activist and labor historian Peter Kellman, whose ideas have helped shape this column. Any faults in it are entirely my own.