

## A Real Man: Gender and Sexuality in the United States' 2004 Public Election

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### Introduction

In November 2004, incumbent George W. Bush narrowly defeated challenger John Kerry in the United States presidential elections. Analysts were quick to point to a Gallup poll that indicated that many people listed "moral values" as their reason for voting for Bush. The meaning of the phrase remained vague and flexible, but many, including most prominently Bush's chief political adviser, Karl Rove, took it to mean voters were reacting against Kerry's relative supportiveness for gay rights. According to Rove, "People do not like the idea or the concept of marriage as being a union between a man and a woman being uprooted and overturned" (quoted in Nagourney, 2004). In the same elections, eleven different states voted on referendums explicitly banning gay marriages; all the bans passed by "depressingly large" margins ranging from 86 percent to 57 percent (Zernike). The high turnout from conservative voters anxious to send a message against gay marriage apparently aided Bush's re-election.

The extent to which public concerns about homosexuality affected the elections remains unclear, but certainly the public discourse leading up to the elections revolved a great deal around issues of gender and sexuality. This paper examines four news stories that appeared in the months before the election; each story reveals something about the tangled snarl of assumptions and assertions that mark contemporary American discourse about gender and sexuality.

### Girlie Men

In July 2004, recently elected Republican governor Arnold Schwarzenegger mockingly referred to Democrats blocking his planned budget as "girlie men." The phrase's complicated origins lie in Schwarzenegger's history as a macho body builder and movie star: a Saturday Night Life comedy skit of the time featured two parodic, hyper-macho versions of Schwarzenegger who always referred to their opponents as "girlie

men.”

Schwarzenegger’s dismissive and ironic use of the quote prompted reactions from the maligned Democrats, who argued that “it uses an image that is associated with gay men in an insulting way, and it was supposed to be an insult. That’s very troubling that he would use such a homophobic way of trying to put down legislative leadership” (State Senator Sheila Kuehl, quoted in Fagan, 2004). However, the light tone and self-deprecating overtone to Schwarzenegger’s comments (the parody versions of him were, after all, pathetic losers), served to defuse most criticism. In fact, Schwarzenegger went on to make the same reference at the Republican National Convention in late August 2004, announcing “to those critics who are so pessimistic about our economy, I say: Don’t be economic girlie-men.”

Clearly the remark resonated strongly with its audiences--positively with Republicans and negatively with Democrats, but strongly either way. This resonance reveals certain complicated interlacings of gender and sexuality in 21st-century America, and is a good place to begin this examination.

Sen. Kuehl’s comments indicate a reflexive assumption that “girlie men” are gay men--an assumption that may seem natural in current American discourse but is not necessarily a universal assumption. Homosexuality and effeminacy (a word which implies feminine behavior and appearance in a man, with a strong negative connotation) are not and have not always been inextricably linked. In many pre-modern and classical societies, men who had sexual relations with other men were sometimes seen as even more manly than men who had sex with women. However, the stigma often remained for the partner who played the passive role in sex--that is, to be blunt, the man who was penetrated like a woman. John Boswell notes that in pre-modern Germanic societies, as in many others, “No man could be sexually passive with another and retain the respect accorded a fighting adult male,” although “active homosexuality was not reprehensible” (1980, 184; see also 157, 234, 74-77 for discussions of the same assumption in other pre-modern cultures). Many societies past and present have assumed that most or all homosexual relationships have a clear active and passive partner, each generally clearly distinguishable by physical markers like age, dress, and nonverbal behavior. Most modern Western homosexual couples,

however, do not have a fixed and publicly coded set of markers for "active" and "passive" roles. As a result, it seems possible that the deep stigma that remains against the passive role, the fear prompted by gender blurring when a man is penetrated during sex, has become transferred to gay men in general. All gay men are branded as "effeminate" in modern American discourse. As a result, to be called a "girlie man" is to be by definition branded gay.

Despite these tangled connections, there is of course nothing in the phrase itself that necessarily implies homosexuality. Rather, the real insult in the phrase is in the imputation of female characteristics--weakness, vainness, cowardice, etc.--to a man. It is interesting to note that Schwarzenegger is quite pro-gay-rights, especially for a Republican, supporting gay adoption and domestic partnerships with full legal rights to gay couples ("Arnold Schwarzenegger"). At the same time, he has become notorious for his misogynistic comments and aggressive, even harassing, sexual behavior towards women ("Woman Sues"). Yet the association of homosexuality and effeminacy is strong enough that "girlie man" strikes most American listeners as more homophobic than misogynistic.

Schwarzenegger's "Girlie men" comments were not directed at presidential candidate John Kerry. However, they reveal a certain public mood--filled with anxiety about gender issues and homosexuality--that colored public discourse in the United States leading up to the November elections. In the next examples, these anxieties focus more specifically on the figures of John Kerry and his running mate, John Edwards.

#### "I Do Manicures"

After a debate between George W. Bush and John Kerry on Sept. 20, 2004, Fox News put an article on its web site describing Kerry's reactions to his performance during the debate. The article quoted Kerry as gushing, "Didn't my nails and cuticles look great? What a good debate!. . . Women should like me! I do manicures," and describing himself as a "metrosexual"--a neologism denoting a man who is extremely concerned with his physical attractiveness and stylishness ("Trail Tales," 2004). The quotes turned out to be entirely fabricated, and the reporter, who insisted he had submitted the list of quotes as a joke, was reprimanded.

The fact that such over-the-top comments seemed plausible enough to the people at Fox news to print them as fact reveals much about the way Kerry was framed during the elections. Where George W. Bush was presented as rugged and "manly," Kerry was often presented as somehow vaguely (or not so vaguely) effeminate. Robert Greenwald's documentary "Outfoxed" shows Fox anchors repeatedly asserting that Kerry was French or favored by the French, at a time when many Americans associated Frenchness with, well, "girlie-man" weakness and conciliation (O'Hehir, 2004). News stories often focused on Kerry's effete tendencies versus Bush's vigorous manliness; rarely couched so bluntly but generally clearly. The Bush campaign's successful rhetorical campaign to portray Kerry as a "flip-flopper" positioned Kerry as indecisive, over-intellectual, and ineffectual as opposed to Bush's brash decisiveness and blunt effectiveness. Indeed, one of Kerry supporters' most common complaints about Bush--his lack of intelligence and culture--ended up being a strength for Bush due to the long-standing American distrust of intellectualism as effete and somehow unmanly. Intellectualism is cultured, and according to this tradition "culture is impractical and men of culture are ineffectual. . . culture is feminine and cultivated men tend to be effeminate" (Hofstadter, 1966, 186).

Fox News's mistake reveals the ways in which masculinity is coded in contemporary American rhetoric. Kerry's intelligence and overuse in speeches of "caveats and curliques. . . . pointless embellishments" (Saletan, 2004) marked him as weak, indirect, and unmanly--a rhetorical "girlie man" who was more concerned with appearances than substance. Inevitably, it became feasible to see him as obsessively concerned with his *own* appearance, talking about manicures and calling himself a metrosexual. Because of the way in which effeminacy is coded as inevitably homosexual in current American discourse, it was only a matter of time before people started calling Kerry gay.

#### Kerry + Edwards

At this point the stories leave the mainstream media and forge instead into the "blogosphere," another neologism which refers to the endless, free-wheeling, and densely hyper-linked political conversations held on web logs ("blogs") on the Internet. Blogs are generally run by amateurs rather than professional journalists, and as such are much

more likely to express opinions you won't see in the New York Times or even on Fox News. As such, they are extremely unreliable sources for factual information, but provide excellent examples of public perceptions and rhetorical undercurrents.

When the youthful, blond, and attractive John Edwards was chosen by John Kerry as his running mate, he was quickly dubbed the "Breck Girl" by political junkies. The nickname was reinforced by a video feed of him spending about five minutes fussing with his hair in preparation for a speech (Noah, 2004). The "Breck Girl" was a famous advertising icon: a woman with perfect blonde hair. There are, of course, also well-known images of men who care about their hair; writers could have referred to Edwards as "Sampson" (the Biblical character whose strength was in his hair) or "Fabio" (a male supermodel with beautiful hair) and retained the same caustic tone. However, using instead the image of a woman—a "girl," even—accented Edwards's perceived lack of manliness. Edwards was also younger and shorter than Kerry, two other characteristics traditionally assumed to mark a passive homosexual partner. He was clearly in a subordinate position to Kerry, as his running mate. In addition, the Democratic party is much more supportive of gay rights than the Republican party. All these things combined to give bloggers, many of them already prepared to say outrageous things the "mainstream media" would not, fertile ground for accusations of homosexuality.

Shortly after Kerry chose Edwards as his running mate, commentators began to note their apparent "unusual physical intimacy." The two touched, hugged and embraced each other often and stood closer together than considered normal for two straight men. The first semi-public voice to make the inference was Matt Drudge, creator of "The Drudge Report," a web site devoted to gossip and muckraking about politicians and celebrities. In early July, Drudge posted a series of photographs showing Kerry and Edwards hugging or looking at each other, with the comments, "Hugs, kisses to the cheek, affectionate touching of the face, caressing of the back, grabbing of the arm, fingers to the neck, rubbing of the knees... John Kerry and John Edwards can't keep their hands off each other!" Late-night comedians were quick to pick up the joke: Jay Leno quipped "Have you been watching Kerry and Edwards on the campaign trail? These guys have done more hugging in four days than Bill and Hillary have done in 26 years," and Craig Kilborn joked on his

show, "Have you seen John Kerry and John Edwards? They're touching, they're hugging, they're groping. Even the 'Queer Eye' guys [gay hosts of a television makeover show] are going, 'Get a room!'" (quoted in Kurtzman, 2004). The comedians were being tongue-in-cheek, but political weblogs and discussion boards roiled with comments about the "metrosexual gigolo and the boy toy" (Peach, 2004) and photos of the two with captions added like "Why won't you kiss me in public like you kissed me last night?" (Binger, 2004). It was difficult to tell how seriously the discussants took their comments, but in some ways whether or not they actually believed Kerry and Edwards were lovers was beside the point. Whether the two were having sex or not, their focus on appearances and their nonverbal interactions with each other tainted them with the stigma of being either homosexual, effeminate, or both. The candidates' specific sexual activity was not an issue so much as their perceived lack of traditional masculinity.

Eventually even established news outlets picked up on the trope. For example, the Associated Press had an article analyzing the pair's nonverbals in language that could not help but imply intimacy: "With a toothy smile, the North Carolina senator opens his arms wide and wraps an equally sunny Kerry in a bear hug. The two clap each other sometimes once, often twice, on the back with both hands. Pulling apart, they each drape an arm around each other. . . . Sometimes the two tilt their heads together to make inaudible comments" (quoted in Boehlert, 2004). The tangled associations between feminine-gendered behavior like touching and hugging and homosexual tendencies made it inevitable that Kerry and Edwards would appear somehow less "manly" than their un-huggy opponents in stories such as this.

### Hamster Love

Perhaps the strangest and hardest-to-explain story of the election occurred during the Democratic National Convention. Introducing her father, Alexandra Kerry told an anecdote intended to show her father as a humane rescuer: one day her pet hamster's cage fell into a lake. Her father had retrieved the cage, then resuscitated the hamster. "There were some reports of mouth-to-mouth, but, I admit that's probably a trick of memory," she added jokingly (2004). Unfortunately for Senator Kerry, this brief anecdote

collided with a persistent urban legend and the complicated discourse about sexuality and gender to create an unexpected effect.

There is a tenacious urban legend (a story repeated as true but never actually confirmed) that gay men enjoy a practice called "gerbil-stuffing," in which live small rodents are inserted into someone's anus for sexual pleasure. Although there has never actually been a reported case of this activity, the belief persists (Adams, 1988, 217). For some reason, in fact, the story became attached to actor Richard Gere in the mid-1980's—Gere was supposedly rushed to the hospital after a gerbil-stuffing gone wrong (Mikkelson & Mikkelson, 2001). As a result of this urban legend, small rodents have vague but undeniable connotations of homosexuality and perversion to many Americans.

Because of these connotations, Alexandra Kerry's story became a useful starting point for people who wanted to imply "abnormal" sexuality to Senator Kerry. A writer like Barbara Comstock, writing for the relatively respectable National Review website, didn't need to make explicit her innuendos when she wrote:

John Kerry once administered CPR to a hamster. This was one of the poignant vignettes we learned tonight from one of his daughters. Is there some

gerbil-loving swing demographic out there we are trying to connect with? His daughter told this story as if we could all relate to this "human" moment of mouth-to-mouth contact with a rodent. I think I can speak for most parents, that while we might lay down our lives for our children; we see no need to swap spit with vermin. . . . John Kerry may have been able to breath [sic] life into a hamster; and he may have been able to breath some hope (or is it help?) into the gerbil-loving delegates. (2004)

One of the subtleties of this passage is the shift from the term "hamster" to "gerbil"; Kerry "swapped spit" (slang for kissing) a hamster, but the passage refers to "gerbil-lovers." Because the urban legend is always about a gerbil rather than a hamster, the switch from hamster to gerbil makes clear that the passage is meant to have strong connotations of sexual perversion and homosexuality. Discussions on the Internet often linked Kerry and hamsters in sexual ways when referring to the story: one satirical story has Richard Gere tearfully confessing that John Kerry had attempted to save Gere's beloved

hamster by extracting it from the actor's rectum and performing mouth-to-mouth:

I removed my pants, and using techniques I believe he may have learned during his tour of duty in 'Nam, within minutes, he was able to remove Percival from captivity. It was not a pretty sight...my rectum, that is. John Kerry could only think of saving that precious gerbil's life. "Damn, I'm not hearing a heartbeat!," I feverishly heard him exclaim. Once more, without concern for his own well-being, Kerry attempted to revive my soulmate Percival, but alas it was to no avail. I held Kerry in my arms in a feeble act of consolation, and then I fainted. (Anderson, 2004)

Again, the complicated relationships between the feminine qualities of compassion and concern for small, cute animals and the homosexual connotations of small rodents lead inexorably to intimations of Kerry (and Gere's) homosexuality.

## Conclusion

From relatively mundane insults to outrageously bizarre intimations of gay bestiality, the 2004 United States presidential campaign was full of complicated nuances of gender and sexuality. Undercurrents and assumptions that tie together feminine behavior and homosexual behavior underlay much of the rhetoric of the election. The stories described above make clear how strange and convoluted rhetoric can become when it taps into the tangled web of associations between sex and gender in modern American society. It remains debatable whether or not the intimations of Kerry as effeminate, unmanly, or even homosexual made a difference in the elections. However, the extent to which the extreme rhetoric of the blogosphere appeared in a modified form in the mainstream press indicates that at some level, these associations were at work in the mind of the average voter. One veteran's message posted on a web page summed up the election thus: "I am thankful to finally have a real man serving as our president" (Fenton). In the complicated nuance of the phrase "real man" (have other presidents been lacking the Y chromosome?) one can see the reason and the driving force behind all of this paper's examples.

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