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Barbarians and Wimps: America's Boy Problem

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Monday, February 23, 2004

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In his influential book, *The Boy Problem*, Forbush offered a plan for recovering America's adolescent boys. He called for fathers to play a more direct role in the raising of their sons, for schools to give attention to the particular needs of boys, and for the formation and support of organizations that would take boys off the streets and offer moral and spiritual formation.

The "boy problem" as observed by William Forbush looks almost quaint by today's standards. In the year 2004, America faces a far greater crisis in a generation of boys and young men who have been unfathered, untutored, undisciplined, and ultimately unleashed on society. From the ancient Greeks onward, civilization has existed only where boys are raised and socialized to be men and to assume the responsibilities of manhood. In the Bible, Solomon's moral instruction to his own son is found in the book of Proverbs, offering timeless insight into the reality of manhood and its challenges.

A fascinating view into the world of contemporary boyhood is offered by Terrence O. Moore in the winter 2003 issue of the *Claremont Review of Books*. In "Wimps and Barbarians: The Sons of Murphy Brown," Moore offers a trenchant diagnosis of contemporary boyhood and the challenge our new "boy problem" presents to the nation.

Moore begins and ends his essay by remembering "Avery," the fictional son of the fictional Murphy Brown, the news commentator played by Candice Bergen on prime time television. Murphy Brown's son—infamously born out of wedlock—became a major issue of nation-wide controversy when vice president Dan Quayle made the child a focus of national concern when he charged that Murphy Brown and her son represented a breakdown of family values and stability. The cultural elite went after Quayle like dogs chasing a stray cat, and Quayle was derided for his backward views and traditional morality.

Taking his cue from the television program, Terrence Moore realized that Avery would now be a teenager, and, though Avery was a fictional boy, Moore sees Avery's generation on a daily basis. "As a Marine, college professor, and now principal of a K-12 charter school," Moore relates, "I have deliberately tried to figure out whether the nation through its most important institutions of moral instruction—its families and schools—is turning boys into responsible young men." Moore answers the question in the negative, and argues that adolescent boys and young men are now divided between "barbarians" who represent crude, antisocial, and uncivilized character; and "wimps," who are described as "whiny, incapable of making decisions, and in general of 'acting like men.'"

Manhood, Moore explains, "is not simply a matter of being male and reaching a certain age. These are acts of nature; manhood is a sustained act of character."

Moore sees today's young males divided between those who show a crude excess of manliness and those who seem to lack any manliness at all. "So prevalent are these two errant types," Moore asserts, "that the prescription for what ails our young males might be reduced to two simple instructions: Don't be a barbarian, Don't be a wimp. What is left... will be a man."

Where are today's barbarians? Moore locates them at the local shopping mall, wandering about in packs, recognizable by their sloppy dress, their lack of linguistic ability, their crudeness of manners, and their treatment of women. Barbarians do not need words nor use them, they communicate to each other through guttural grunts, shrugs, and various noises. When barbarians actually use words, their speech is most likely to be laced with profanity.

At the other extreme, the wimps lack all manly conviction and character. Robbed of ambition, moral formation, and courage, wimps "make worthless watchdogs." The wimp is incapable of living up to his responsibilities as a man, and shows no valor in his public or private life. "Many of today's young men seem to have no fight in them at all. Not for them to rescue damsels in distress from the barbarians," Moore sadly reflects. The wimp is always looking for the easiest way out of a problem.

With respect to women, barbarians demonstrate a crudeness, profanity, and violence that treats women merely as sex objects for male pleasure. Barbarians show women no respect, and are completely lacking in the manly virtues of protection and respect for the well being of women. Wimps, on the other hand, look to women for emotional support, consider girlfriends to be conversation partners, and look to women for pity. They are shameless.

The existence of barbarians and wimps in the population of young men is not a new development, Moore acknowledges. Nevertheless, "What needs explaining is why these two obviously defective character types have become so common, at times seeming like the norm."

Moore, who deals with adolescent boys everyday as a school principal, argues that these boys and young men are not encouraged to become responsible men. Furthermore, it seems that "every factor effecting their development is profoundly hostile to the ideal and practices of traditional manhood and the painstaking steps necessary to attain it."

Adolescent boys have easy access to sex, are unsupervised for large blocks of time, are not encouraged to prepare for marriage, and are not held accountable by older males—especially their fathers. Moore recounts that half of American boys do not even live with their natural fathers. Generally, sons raised by single mothers "lack strong men to usher them into the world of responsible, adult manhood."

Even when the father is in the home, all too many fathers recede into the background and fail to take up the true responsibilities of fatherhood. Moore remembers when the traditional father "was the sole bread winner, the chief disciplinarian, and the figure who sat at the head of the table and spoke with authority on matters of politics, economics, and religion." That father is a disappearing social type.

Moore goes right to the heart of the problem in raising boys. A regime of permissive parenting has led to soft discipline that produces soft boys who grow to become soft men. Parents are now afraid to discipline, and seem to be more concerned with the development of an artificial "self-esteem" in their boys.

"The boy is never wrong, is never spanked, and is never made to feel ashamed. Postmodern parents believe, at least until it is too late, that raising children must be easy since the nature of children is basically good," Moore reflects. The word 'punishment' has been replaced by 'consequences' which means that discipline no longer addresses the boy's true character.

As Moore traces the problem, boys "are not made feel ashamed for their bad behavior; they must reconsider their 'poor choices.' Least of all will parents spank their sons; if you suggest that they should, they look at you in horror, for after all, 'violence only breeds violence.'"

Moore dismisses this new softer form of discipline, pointing out that it does not work and only leads to mutual frustration. When all else fails, the medical specialist will show up to prescribe Ritalin.

Terrence Moore recognizes that the process of making a man out of a boy is not easy. Discipline stands at the center of

a boy's moral formation, and is best handled by his father who, after all, should remember what was necessary for his own successful emergence into manhood. "The old form of discipline was quick, direct, clear-cut, and effective. The new non-punitive discipline is time-consuming, indirect, muddled, and ineffective." A boy who never feels shame for his wrongdoing and never fears punishment learns that bad behavior brings no consequences and that his own failure of character is someone else's fault.

Moore's essay is a refreshing change of pace from the pabulum routinely handed out to parents by the cultural elite, the educators, and the so-called "experts." We should rightly fear a future in which young men grow into physical maturity only to show themselves as either barbarians or wimps. Unless this pattern is reversed, we face a future dominated by males who never grow up to be men.

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