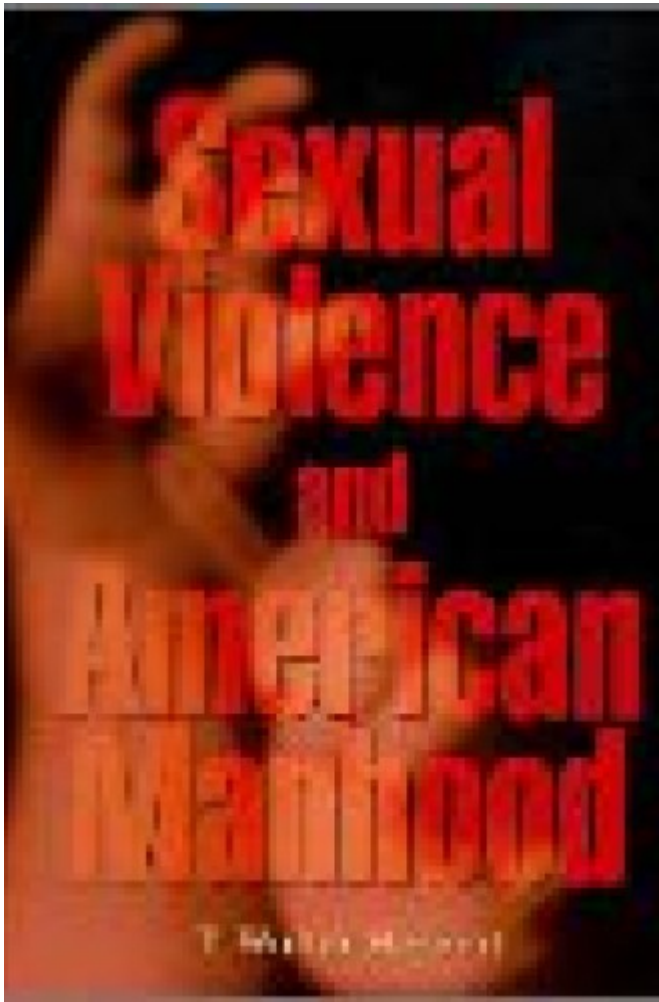


Sexual Violence and American Manhood

reviewed by [Leon Howell](#) in the [June 1, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Sexual Violence and American Manhood

T. Walter Herbert

Harvard University Press

Sexual violence against women—pervasive in our society—is largely hidden, as in the oppressive presence of date rape on university campuses. Occasionally it does rise to the news headlines, sometimes through an individual’s action, as in the rape charges faced by basketball superstar Kobe Bryant or the battering accusations against popular baseball Hall-of-Famer Kirby Puckett. At other times it is episodic, as in the notorious 1991 “Tailhook” scandal involving U.S. naval officers.

Or the scandal can be systemic, as it was in recent years at the Air Force Academy. About 70 percent of the 659 women enrolled had experienced sexual harassment, 19 percent sexual assault and 7 percent rape or attempted rape, according to a 2003 survey by the air force’s inspector general.

These disturbing events are not specifically mentioned in this book. But according to T. Walter Herbert, such behavior is endemic among American men. It cannot be pinned only on athletes or the military, but pervades all facets of American society. It surfaces among elite writers as well as fraternity men and machinists. The myths that undergird male dominance are dilemmas for all men.

Sexual Violence and American Manhood results from Herbert’s efforts to understand the ways in which “our cultural addiction to sexual violence is knotted into the American dream, entangled with ideals of independence, equality and self-reliance that make us proud to be Americans.” Herbert sets out to show that sexual violence is a perversion of those ideals. He believes that men’s tendencies toward such violence are not genetically determined. Rather, they flow from historical conditioning.

Herbert, a professor of English at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, and an expert on Nathaniel Hawthorne, is especially interested in how literature has fostered this painful history. He begins with 18th-century philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, who excuses rape because “woman is made to please and to be subjugated.” In *An American Dream* Norman Mailer offers a contemporary version of Rousseau’s claim to justify sexual violence.

Key to Herbert’s analysis are literary moments that mark a movement toward democratic sharing on sexual and other domestic matters. In a famous letter to her husband, John, Abigail Adams urged him and the Second Continental Congress to limit the ability of “vicious” men to treat women with “cruelty and indignity.” Harriet Beecher Stowe, who bore seven children and had several miscarriages, protested

the “marital rape” of women, equating the status of wives with the slavery she wrote about in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Herbert cites the supportive relationship between the competent pregnant police chief and her artist husband in *Fargo*, the 1996 Academy Award-winning film, as an ideal.

He exposes the myths that allow men to justify sexual domination, whether it takes the form of physical abuse or exclusion from decision-making. A “democratic masculinity” which prohibits the subjugation of women but directs men to uncover what drives them even subconsciously to feel they must dominate is what Herbert seeks. He cites the almost 50-year-old Erich Fromm classic, *The Art of Loving*, which defines “love as union under the conditions of preserving one’s integrity,” love which requires the passionate and dedicated exercise of “care, responsibility, respect and knowledge.”

Though a number of groups such as the National Organization of Men Against Sexism address these issues, Herbert is not optimistic about the potential for significant progress in the current atmosphere. The anxieties of the workplace create tensions within and between sexes. Once-well-paid industrial workers now move from job to job like migrant workers. Many families need two incomes to survive. The military is still dealing with the now-essential integration of women into its ranks. In March Amnesty International pointed to 83 assaults against women in the U.S. military over the past 18 months in Iraq, Kuwait and Bahrain. It cited 1973 domestic violence attacks by military men in the same period.

Economic anxieties partly explain “the ideologically confident tide of male supremacist reaction now running through our religious and political institutions, with powerful representations in the media.” But Herbert is encouraged by the centuries’ old “countercurrent” supportive of women’s right to be liberated from sexual exploitation.

Despite the book’s integrity and insight, I wish it had done more with current cultural representations of male violence, such as the misogyny in much rap music. Yet Herbert’s effort to work through this dilemma by examining himself and engaging his family, his colleagues and his students is both imaginative and admirable. He pays tribute to Marjorie, his wife of 40 years, who practiced family law. They met at Union Theological Seminary and have shared a journey “of education and discovery on the ‘bed and board’ frontier, where we’ve sought an equal and loving marriage.”

The book is dedicated to Herbert's daughter, "now a woman grown, who began to reshape my thinking about gender the moment she was born." For his son, Tom, he hopes "to have interrupted the gender tradition treated in this book." Herbert leaves them—and us—a worthy legacy.