

HUMOR

The Rise And Long-Overdue Fall Of The Wimp

Guilt-ridden, apologetic, quiche-eating wimps had their time in the sun. But now macho men are back.

By Jean Shepherd



TO BE, or not to be: That is the question: . . . To suffer . . . " was literature's first, as far as we know, expression of the basic philosophy of that now well-known and almost universal phenomenon we call the Wimp. Hamlet a wimp? What else? Almost everything he said or did was classic wimpiness. Confused, unable to take action, apologetic and soul-searching, he spent his time fumbling around and whining. And even his whining had wimpiness written all over it.

To wimp, or not to wimp: That is the question that men, particularly American men, have been asking themselves for the past couple of decades, which some observers call the Golden Age of Wimpiness. The wimp world, however, has crested and is in rapid decline, and the macho man — or more properly the masculine man — has come back into the picture.

So it is now time to put down a few



characteristics of the wimp and to write a brief history of the rise and fall of wimpiness. A few years from now, none but a few scholars of language will even know the word existed. The wimp is a dying species. Wimpiness, as we all know, is an acquired aberration, and hence can disappear as quickly as it appears.

The wimp (*Wimpus apologetica americana*) lets his wimpiness affect all of his everyday decisions. For example, a true wimp on the up escalator will involuntarily mutter "excuse me" to the people who are on the down escalator.

A wimp apologizes profusely in the belief that everything is somehow his fault.

And he feels guilty when a plague of locusts hits an obscure country 12,000 miles away. His first question is, "How have I failed them? Where did I go wrong?" He is consumed by guilt, which is not to be confused with compassion, an entirely different emotion. Therein lies a sea of confusion. Guilt is

often mistaken for compassion, and vice versa. Wimpiness is the result.

The rise and fall of the contemporary wimp covered a comparatively short span historically, beginning roughly with the emergence of sad-eyed, apologetic Ringo Starr and ending with a whimper with the defeat of Walter Mondale in the recent election.

Wimps, as we all know, are created by viewing too many Alan Alda movies. At the outset, do not confuse Woody Allen with wimpiness. Indeed not. His films depict a wimp outraged at his wimpiness, mocking his very apology even as he mutters it. A wimp in revolt against himself.

Alda's films, on the other hand, revel in wimpiness, making of it a positive virtue and in fact proclaiming wimpiness as a form of liberation, which, of course, is the opposite of the truth. No one is more in chains than the true wimp, forever quivering over the feelings of others. Eternally consumed by guilt, he rarely sleeps well.

Scholars studying the field believe the high point of wimpiness, the classic scene of true symbolic wimpiness, was captured by the news cameras that showed President Jimmy Carter, his face stricken with fear, seated in a rowboat bravely fighting off an attacking killer rabbit with an oar. This historic moment marked the high-water crest of the wimp movement. In fact, that picture could well have spelled the doom of wimpiness, since it so classically illustrated wimpiness. It became the ultimate political cartoon. From that moment on, wimps were in retreat, casting nervous glances behind them in fear of pursuing rabbits while the rest of us instinctively sighed in relief, hoping that the whole damn madness was now exposed and would die of its own nervousness. As my Aunt Clara used to say: "My best friend, Mabel, died of nerves." I never knew what she meant, but I do now.

And it can be said that the entire Democratic Party — save for Texas cowboy Lyndon B. Johnson — has been a victim of its own corporate wimpiness, enshrining guilt as a primary virtue — self-defeating when the wimp view of the world is fast disappearing. This is not to say that some guilt is not earned meritoriously, but that universal guilt is sheer madness.

The Republican Party, on the other hand, is

synonymous with masculinity. Indeed, the party that gave us Rough-Riding Teddy Roosevelt and that modern-day rough-rider Ronald ("Make My Day") Reagan has been called a lot of things, but wimpiness has never been one of them.

And there is a solid school of political thought that believes that the crushing defeat suffered by Walter Mondale was the end result of this great shift in American attitudes. "Mondale Fights Wimp Label" was the theme of a column by a distinctly Democratic liberal columnist.

He didn't bother to attempt to describe what a wimp is, or more properly was, but a whole population who didn't even know the word "wimp" certainly knew one when they saw one: A nice man who apologizes too mightily.

BETTER, wimps can be defined more by example than by phrases. It is the opinion of many of the more serious students of wimpiness that our political parties represent them generously. Simply put, the Republicans tend to run heavily to nerds, while the Democrats are loaded with well-meaning wimps. Nixon was no wimp. Nerd? Yes, but his obvious lack of guilt feelings, which infuriates many, keeps him well out of the wimp school of politicians. Conversely, Carter's countering the Iranian takeover of our embassy brilliantly, by tying yellow ribbons on bushes, was sheer inspired wimpiness.

During its flood tide, TV talk shows were inundated with countless "liberated" men fervently apologizing for being male. Sure, there were a few holdouts, like Joe Namath, who never could be considered a wimp — even when he was advertising pantyhose. But he was looked upon as somewhat of an oddity.

Whole new industries grew up around the mystique of wimpiness. "The Phil Donahue Show" grew sleek and heavy with commercials. Endless books were written proclaiming the inferiority of the race/sex/nationality of the writer to the race/sex/nationality of those toward whom he/she/it felt guilt.

Is the wimp basically self-destructive? Is his guilt such that he innately desires his own extinction? Is he unconsciously consumed by such intense remorse that he desires to be pursued by avenging rabbits into nothingness? There are those who even say that the late, unlamented Vietnam War was begun in compassion by non-wimps and ended in chaos and defeat by an overwhelming tide of apologetic wimps. This is not to argue the rightness or wrongness of Vietnam, but war is war and faint heart ne'er took Hill 609. Anybody who has ever been in a fistfight knows that once the left hooks start flying, you'd better pitch in, or you'll get your block knocked off. Better not begin the fracas at all, is what I say, but when you do, don't ask the wimps for advice. I've often wondered what Hawkeye Pierce



They're all wimps, says the author. From the top left: former President Jimmy Carter, Phil Donahue and, to Donahue's left, Michael Jackson. From the far left: former Vice President Walter Mondale, Alan Alda, Richard Benjamin and Ringo Starr.

AMERICA'S MACHO MEN



Jimmy Stewart



Nick Nolte



John Wayne



Lyndon Johnson



President Reagan



Clark Gable



Gary Cooper



Clint Eastwood

contributed to the morale of "M*A*S*H" 's 4077th by his endless carping and kvetching. In real life, right in the middle of the third successive one-liner, someone would have reached over and given him a shot in the mouth, and that would have ended that. War is hell.

When T.S. Eliot wrote that the world would end not with a bang but with a whimper, he was proclaiming that if the world ended at all, it would end in an overwhelming flood of wimpiness. Let's face it, the word "wimp" comes from "whimper," a really fine descriptive word. Whimpering is not exactly whining. After all, a whine is a positive statement. A whimper is not nearly as honest as a true, gutty whine. Whimpering is very close to sniveling (they came up with great words in the old days — Dickens' Pecksniff was a great sniveler). Whimpering can be called sniveling, with a strong dash of guilt.

A wimp is almost always quite attractive because he has such endearing eyes, eyes full of fear and concern. Richard Benjamin used to play wimps magnificently. Who can forget his classic wimping in "Goodbye, Columbus"? Trapped in the clutches of the strong, decisive Ali McGraw, he had the scared look of Carter fighting off that damn rabbit. Who could fail to love him, while at the same time feeling a nagging urge to kick him in the butt and yell, "For God's sake, Benjamin, tell her off and clear out!" In the wimp's eyes, bad people (i.e. insensitive) are those who do precisely that. The bad guy in Alda's "Four Seasons"

Bess Armstrong, who radiated life and sexuality — to the dismay of the assembled wimps. I, for one, cheered.

A few years ago, the most admired man in America was Alan Alda and now, according to the most recent survey (USA Today) it is Clint ("Make My Day") Eastwood, who may be a lot of things, but clearly a wimp he ain't. How did this change come about? What shift in the national perception has caused hundreds of frightened Hollywood agents to fan out in the jungle, beating the undergrowth for potential "hunks" while scuttling the contracts of their erstwhile star clients, those tiny undersize actors who for 20 years personified the sensitive wimp? Maybe it was Harrison Ford. Some say it was Christopher Reeve, who, as Superman, took on the whole damn world of evil while Margot Kidder clung to him feverishly. It is significant to note that the third Superman movie, which portrayed our hero as a wimp, was a bomb of cosmic proportions. Fifteen years ago, it would have been a smash. No, to be macho or masculine is no longer to be a fool.

Until the wimps like Alda took over, we lived in a time where men were men: Gary Cooper, Cary Grant, Clark Gable, Jimmy Stewart, John Wayne and Robert Taylor. Later, their shoes were filled by the likes of Nick Nolte and Charles Bronson.

Why has this return to masculinity come about? A wimp would say, "Who is guilty for this ugly change?" An even truer wimp would mutter, "Where did I go wrong? How did I allow this to happen?" A few de-

next wave of pictures will be neoclassic westerns. "Tootsie" will be but a faint memory when the Appaloosas come galloping down the ravines, to the roar of a Colt repeater. Sporadic battling breaks out as the beleaguered wimps circle the wagons, crying piteously, "Where is Phil Donahue when we really need him?" And a sequin-studded Michael Jackson cowers wimpily in front of the shadow of Bruce Springsteen, the Boss.

Even in cars the change is clearly noticeable. Sonny, the macho cop who lives with an alligator (an alligator!) on "Miami Vice," drives a mean, black, thundering Ferrari, not a machine for the faint of heart, I can tell you. It is today's equivalent of The Lone Ranger's mighty Silver, a horse that certainly was no gelding. The idea of Sonny, of Clint Eastwood in drag, is totally absurd, and guess where they are in the polls.

And men's clothing is changing. The fedora hat, which was the trademark of the old macho days of Bogie and Al Capone, has made an astounding comeback. There are those who even say that Harrison Ford hit it big because he wore such a lid and not the other way around. "HATS ARE HOT," a recent headline in a men's fashion magazine, said it all. The hat has always been a potent symbol.

A poll of college women re-
Turn to page 36



AP Photo

cently came up with the finding that most would prefer a date with Dirty Harry than with Dustin Hoffman. A few years ago, it would have been no contest.

Wimpy food is even going the way of the wimp. Recently, New York

magazine did a piece on the rise of good old American classic food. What is good old American classic food? Is it alfalfa sprouts? Granola? Is it quiche? Perrier? Nope. The piece goes on to extol the virtues of pot roast, apple pie, mashed pota-

toes and even meat loaf. You could see Gary Cooper sitting down to a meal of pot roast and mashed potatoes before he went out to fight the bad guys in "High Noon." Yes, it's true, real men don't eat quiche. The New York Times recently devoted a

whole big chunk of its lifestyle section to the subject of apple pie. Apple pie! A few years ago, poor old apple pie was the symbol of devotion for all things macho, right, as in "as American as motherhood and apple pie," and we all knew that that was a put-down.

There are a few rearguard actions, such as the recent rash of movies where tiny, valiant women "save the farm" while their wimpy husbands lurk in the background, holding the kids in their arms, but the corner has been turned. Like most massive social shifts, no one can say for sure why. Anyone who pretends to do so is blowing smoke, because the single hardest thing to explain in the end is yourself. Hard is really not the word. Impossible is closer to the truth.

Since wimpiness is a subtle phenomenon, it is almost impossible to define truly in neat, clean words. It is a little like "love" in that respect. Try to define that concept. It ain't easy.

Wimps have always been with us. Cowering in a prehistoric cave, even

There are a few rearguard actions, such as the recent rash of movies where tiny, valiant women "save the farm" while their wimpy husbands lurk in the background.

an ancient clan of human beings probably knew them. (I can see it now: As a marauding pack of ferocious wolves circles the cave mouth, readying for the attack, the cave leader bellows out, "Wolves! Wolves!" From somewhere deep in the cave, the wimp mutters, "We must try to understand their side. After all, by being here, we have tempted them to attack. It is our fault. Let us send a delegation to discuss . . .")

So there you have it. Some decades the wimps are in the saddle, and some decades the macho men are calling the shots. It doesn't matter in the end. We'll go flubbing onward. But for now, the wimps are in full retreat, taking with them their quiche recipes and fancy haircuts. Bring on the pot roast!

Jean Shepherd is an author, screenwriter and playwright whose "Jean Shepherd's America" series is currently appearing on PBS.



When you can't smoke, but you want to enjoy tobacco, try Skoal Bandits™

Today, there are more and more places where you can't smoke. That's why there's Skoal Bandits—tobacco that comes in a neat little pouch. It's not chewing tobacco. You just put the pouch between your upper cheek and gum and enjoy the refreshing taste—wherever you are. Comes in mint or wintergreen. So when you can't smoke, make out like a Bandit. With Skoal Bandits.

For a free sample of Skoal Bandits mint, send your name, address and age to Skoal Bandits, Dept. ID-502, Box 2900, Greenwich, CT 06836. Allow 4-6 weeks for delivery. Offer good only in U.S.A.

Offer not available to minors.

Send for our color catalog packed with the newest caps, jackets, shirts and more. Send your name and address along with \$1.00 (which may be applied toward initial purchase) to: Skoal Bandits, Dept. 33-W40-IF, P.O. Box 729, Sparta, NC 28675.



The little pouch of tobacco pleasure™

