

THE MAN CARD: WHITE MALE IDENTITY POLITICS FROM NIXON TO TRUMP

[TRANSCRIPT]

WOLF BLITZER: Right now, a historic moment. We can now project the winner of the presidential race. CNN projects Donald Trump wins the presidency.

JOE SCARBOROUGH: This was an earthquake unlike any earthquake I've really seen since Ronald Reagan in 1980. It just came out of nowhere.

DONALD TRUMP: It's been what they call a historic event.

NARRATOR: In 2016, Donald Trump pulled off one of the greatest upsets in American political history, defying both polls and pundits.

JOHN ROBERTS: So help me, God.

DONALD TRUMP: So help me, God.

NARRATOR: Two explanations for his shocking victory dominated media coverage. One was economic and class anxiety.

JAKE TAPPER: The Clinton campaign could see white working class voters going to Trump in places like Iowa and Ohio.

NARRATOR: The other was racial and cultural anxiety.

VAN JONES: This was a white-lash against a changing country.

BAKARI SELLERS: We try to find these voters who are economic anxiety voters, but that is not what it is, Wolf. What it is is it's cultural anxiety.

NARRATOR: While both explanations were legitimate, they only told part of the story. Yes, Trump won the white vote by a large margin. But a closer look inside the numbers revealed that it was white men in particular, who were most responsible for Trump's success. Trump not only won big with college educated and upper class white men. He won with a record setting margin with white working class men as well. Clearly captivated by Trump's throwback tough guy persona.

DONALD TRUMP: Get him out of here. Throw him out. Excuse me, sit down. You weren't called. Sit down. Sit down. Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners when somebody disrespects our flag to say, get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out. He's fired. He's fired!

NARRATOR: But contrary to conventional wisdom, his impressive showing with white men didn't come out of nowhere.

DONALD TRUMP: We will make America great again.

RONALD REAGAN: We will make America great again.

NARRATOR: Trump's wild popularity with men across class lines marked the culmination of a political shift that's been more than a half century in the making.

DONALD TRUMP: USA. USA.

NARRATOR: A shift that's seeing more and more working class white men abandon the Democratic party for a political movement that has routinely undercut their economic interests, yet clearly spoken to their emotional identities and longings as men.

[OPENING CREDITS]

BARBARA WALTERS: So it isn't enough just to be a good president, you have to look like a good president?

MICHAEL DEEVER: Well, I think looking obviously, and appearance is very important, but it's also how you stage the message. It's a game, Barbara.

PIERS MORGAN: Anything that is actually masculine anymore is now a stick to be beat.

MAN: Real men do not suck at the teat of big government.

ANDREA TANTAROS: The left has culturally tried to feminize this country in a way that is disgusting.

DONALD TRUMP: I'm going to bomb the shit out of them. Bye. Go home to mommy. Go home to mommy.

DAVID BROOKS: Donald Trump is a cliché of old fashioned masculinity.

SEBASTIAN GORKA: The era of the pajama boy is over and the alpha males are back.

DAVID BROOKS: And a lot of people long for that kind of masculinity, which is never coming back.

ANDREA TANTAROS: You see blue collar voters, men, this is like their last vestige. Their last hope is Donald Trump to get their masculinity back.

MAN ON NEWS: The man card is a card that Trump is playing. He is appealing to men.

[TITLE SCREEN]

NARRATOR: The American presidency was conceived from the start as a white male institution. For roughly the first 100 years of the nation's existence, only white men had the right to vote. And although, Black men were formerly, if not in practice, granted the right in 1870, women would still be barred from voting for another half century. With this as the foundation, it doesn't come as a surprise that all 45 US presidents have been men, or that 44 of those 45 have been white men. Or that only three women have even been nominated for the vice presidency. To this day, the symbolism we equate with the presidency is linked in the American imagination with traditional ideas around manhood. The President of the United States is the CEO of the most powerful nation on Earth. The Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. The father figure and protector from threats, both foreign and domestic. This is clearly one of the many reasons women have had such a hard time gaining traction in American presidential politics.

ROBERT BOYD: And do you think in any way, that the Soviets might be tempted to try to take advantage of you simply because you are a woman?

NARRATOR: Women not only have to overcome the deeply sexist and unfounded assumption that men are somehow tougher than they are, they also have to find ways to live up to the masculine mystique that surrounds the presidency without coming across as too unlikable. But what's received far less attention is the profound impact ideas around manhood have played in shaping the presidential campaigns of male candidates as well. Especially since the 1960s, when male power and authority started to come under attack. And American presidential politics began to emerge as a key staging ground in a larger crisis of white masculinity.

RICHARD NIXON

NARRATOR: The story begins with two seemingly unconnected cultural events, the Urban Riots of 1968 and the Hard Hat Riots in 1970. Both involve an immensely important figure in the late 20th century American politics, Republican Richard Nixon.

RICHARD NIXON: This is a nation of laws and as Abraham Lincoln has said, no one is above the law, no one is below the law. And we're going to enforce the law. And Americans should remember that if we're going to have law and order.

NARRATOR: Nixon won the presidency in 1968 in a campaign that emphasized law and order. In a country roiled by social unrest and urban riots, and shaken by the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Democratic Presidential Candidate Bobby Kennedy. Historians now regard the 1960s as a pivotal era of uprisings in reaction to

deeply entrenched systemic racism and injustice. But the '60s also gave rise to a political backlash that continues to this day. With violent crime on the rise and cultural norms being openly challenged, Nixon was able to harness the fear, anxiety, and anger of white middle class America and position himself as the kind of strong man and tough leader the nation needed to defend the status quo.

RICHARD NIXON: Let us recognize that the first civil right of every American is to be free from domestic violence. So I pledge to you, we shall have order in the United States.

NARRATOR: Nixon's media advisor was none other than Roger Ailes, one of the first people to recognize the transformative power of television in American politics. A future campaign advisor to several Republican presidents, right up through Donald Trump, he would go on to found the Fox News Channel, forever altering the political media landscape. Ailes was adept at whipping up white fears of urban crime, painting Democrats as too weak and soft to deal with it, and positioning Conservative Republicans as the only ones capable of making Americans, especially white women, safe again.

RICHARD NIXON AD: Freedom from fear is a basic right of every American, we must restore it.

NARRATOR: In May of 1970, in what came to be known as the Hard Hat Riots, an angry crowd of white construction workers attacked an anti-war protest march in New York City. A March in response to the killing of four students at Kent State University at the hands of National Guardsmen. The Hard Hat Riots revealed a growing split in the Democratic party, not only over the increasingly divisive Vietnam War, but between college educated people with more liberal attitudes towards racial and gender equality and a more socially conservative white working class.

MAN ON NEWS: I'm a little sick of watching these kids burn a flag. And I know a lot of guys went over and didn't come back. And I don't like it. I'm here to say I love the flag.

MAN ON NEWS: We're in support of Nixon.

NARRATOR: To the Nixon camp, this divide was political gold. The Republicans could position themselves as allies of blue collar workers, along with the brave young men all fighting for the American way of life in Vietnam.

PETER JENNINGS: The leaders of the construction unions were invited to the White House where they presented President Nixon with an honorary hard hat. And the hard hat became a symbol for the so-called silent majority, those who felt their way of life was now under siege.

NARRATOR: For decades, going back to FDR's New Deal in the 1930s and the height of the labor movement, working class white men had been rock solid Democrats, union men, and wouldn't have dreamed of voting Republican. A party that had been long identified with greedy business owners and out of touch elites, hostile to the interests of labor and the average working man. But in the late '60s, the Democrats long standing image as the party of the white working class began to change, thanks in part to Nixon's mobilization of the politics of white grievance. White voters, especially in the South, had started to flee the Democratic party after President Lyndon Johnson, a Democrat, signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964. And Nixon and the Republican Party would take advantage, capitalizing on the anxieties and resentments of growing numbers of white voters. Especially white men, who experienced the struggle for equality as a threat to their cultural centrality. As presidential aide, Patrick J Buchanan said to Nixon, these are our people now. In 1972, facing mounting public opposition to his prosecution of the war in Vietnam, Nixon ran for re-election against South Dakota Democratic Senator George McGovern, a liberal who opposed the war. Nixon and his handlers had paid close attention to the electoral success of former Alabama Governor George Wallace, a longtime southern Democrat who ran for president as an independent in 1968.

GEORGE WALLACE: They ignore us and look down their nose at us and call us everything under the sun. And I'm sick and tired of it, and I resent it.

NARRATOR: Wallace had found a way to speak directly to the racial and class grievances and resentments of white working class Southerners. Picking up nearly 10 million votes, he won five southern states and ran surprisingly strong in parts of the North. Nixon immediately recognized how valuable Wallace's strategy could be to the Republican Party and his own re-election bid. He knew Republicans couldn't promise white working people better wages or benefits, that would hurt the profits of the plutocrats who controlled the Republican Party. Instead, he would give them the greatest gift of all, cultural recognition. With the help of speechwriter Pat Buchanan, Nixon invoked the silent majority, hardworking Americans being left behind in the wake of seismic demographic and societal changes.

RICHARD NIXON: So tonight, to you, the great silent majority, my fellow Americans, I ask for your support.

NARRATOR: Nixon championed this so-called forgotten man, the regular Joe in distinct contrast to the supposed elitism of liberals like McGovern. By any measure, McGovern was far from an elitist. In fact, he was a longtime champion of organized labor and a progressive populist who supported lunch bucket economic policies that were popular with white working class voters. But his liberal stance on social issues and his popularity with anti-war, civil rights, and women's rights advocates rendered him vulnerable to attacks from the Nixon camp. McGovern's opposition to the war in Vietnam and his support of amnesty for draft evaders made it especially easy for Republicans to portray him as weak. It didn't matter that McGovern was a decorated fighter pilot in World War

II. To his conservative detractors, he represented a liberal Democratic party that had not only grown soft, but also seemed to care more about the struggles of women and people of color than the struggles of ordinary blue collar white men. In 1972, Nixon won re-election with 66% of the white male vote on the way to a historic 49 state landslide with a message that centered upon traditional ideas about manhood that clearly resonated with white women as well. Democrats in turn, were handed a sobering message. A message that would resonate for the next half century. A failure to appear strong on the military or tough on law and order would be viewed as a reflection not only of their political priorities, but on their manhood.

RONALD REAGAN

NARRATOR: In the 1960s, Ronald Reagan seemed to walk onto the American political stage straight from central casting. And in a way, that's exactly what he'd done. Reagan had made his name in the 1950s as a TV host, commercial pitchman, and B-movie star with an affinity for cowboy roles. At the time, John Wayne was Hollywood's biggest star and was cementing his status as the archetypal American tough guy. And Reagan following suit, did his best to project the same aura as an actor.

RONALD REAGAN: You wanted law and order in this town, you've got it. And you're going to keep on having it as long as I'm Marshal.

NARRATOR: When he eventually made the transition to politics as Governor of California, Reagan borrowed from the same script, helping to consolidate the growing right wing backlash against the anti-war movement and counterculture in the process.

RONALD REAGAN: Here, a small minority of beatniks, radicals, and filthy speech advocates have brought shame on a great university. I am sick and tired of the argument about whether some effort to enforce law and order is going to escalate anything at all. Plain truth of the matter is this has to stop and it has to stop like the day before yesterday. And it's going to be stopped whatever it takes.

NARRATOR: Two decades later, Reagan would ride his reputation as the John Wayne of American politics straight to the White House. In 1980, under Democratic President Jimmy Carter, the Iranian hostage crisis had humiliated the country, oil prices had skyrocketed, and the nation was mired in a deep recession. And Republicans placed the blame squarely on Carter. Charging him in his party with breeding dependence on the nanny state and being too soft to lead in a dangerous world. In the height of the Cold War, many feared that the folksy Carter, who epitomized the introspective sensitive new man of the 1970s, was no match for violent adversaries like Soviet communists and Muslim terrorists. Enter Reagan, in full cowboy mode to save the day.

DAVID BRINKLEY: You're the only movie actor I know of who ever got elected to a high office. Do you learn anything as an actor that has been useful to you as president?

RONALD REAGAN: Well, I'm tempted to say something here.

DAVID BRINKLEY: Go ahead and say it.

RONALD REAGAN: Well, I'm going to say it.

DAVID BRINKLEY: Go ahead.

RONALD REAGAN: There have been times in this office when I've wondered how you could do the job if you hadn't been an actor.

NARRATOR: Although Reagan's acting chops allowed him to create the illusion of authenticity, cowboy toughness and blue collar manliness, in reality, he was a charter member of California's country club elite. But he knew how to read a script, had already rehearsed the part and had media savvy handlers adept at crafting an image ordinary American guys could relate to. And the need for an actor of Reagan's talents made sense given the reality of the policies being sold to the public. For years, conservatives have been pushing to cut Medicare, Social Security, and other government programs designed to aid working class and poor Americans while calling for massive increases in military spending, deeply unpopular tax cuts for the rich, and a radical rollback of government regulations, workers protections, and union power to maximize corporate profits at all costs. As the new front man for the cause, Reagan's handlers knew it was critical to dig deep into the mythology of American TV and movie culture and portray him as a salt of the Earth working class man of the people. It was a throwback persona that would also serve Reagan well in advancing the agenda of another driving force of the newly ascendant conservative movement, white Evangelical Christians.

MAN: In behalf of more than 30 million Evangelical Christians in America, we welcome you, Governor Ronald Reagan.

NARRATOR: Evangelicals were less interested in making Wall Street and corporate America rich than in rolling back the dramatic gains achieved by the women's and gay liberation movements on reproductive rights, workplace discrimination, domestic violence, and many other fronts. Throughout the 1970s, the Democratic party had aligned itself with feminists and gay rights advocates on issue after issue. In response, white Evangelicals mobilized like never before and went to work on Republicans in Congress.

JERRY FALWELL: Moral Majority is not a religious organization. The fact is that it's political, it's a very political organization. And one's membership is based upon

citizenship in this country and a commitment to a pro-life, pro-traditional family, pro-moral, and pro-American position.

NARRATOR: In many ways, the Evangelical movement's aim was to restore traditional, straight, white male authority. These so-called values voters were particularly alarmed by Supreme Court rulings and legislation that expanded opportunities for women to succeed outside the home, which they saw as a threat not only to men's status as head of the household, but to the stability of the patriarchal order itself. And their success in driving the Republican Party to the right on these issues was unmistakable. In just one of many examples, in 1971, more than 90% of House and Senate Republicans supported the Equal Rights Amendment, which if adopted, would have granted women full rights in the Constitution. But by 1978, almost 70% of Republicans opposed it. And after their success pushing Congress to the right, all that remained was the presidency. And they found their man in Ronald Reagan.

RONALD REAGAN: Now, I know this is a non-partisan gathering, and so I know that you can't endorse me. But I only brought that up because I want you to know that I endorse you and what you're doing.

NARRATOR: Reagan set in motion a political realignment that shapes presidential politics to this day, by uniting three very different conservative constituencies under the GOP tent. Big business Republicans, the newly ascended Christian right, and so-called Reagan Democrats. Working class men of the Rust Belt and Heartland whose fathers would never have dreamed of voting Republican. The result was a crushing 2 to 1 margin of victory with white male voters in the 1980 election. And the first major gender gap in American presidential politics. One that would help earn Reagan two terms and shape American politics for decades to come.

GEORGE HW BUSH

GEORGE HW BUSH: But where is it written that we must act if we do not care as if we're not moved? Well, I am moved. I want a kinder and gentler nation.

NARRATOR: Vice President George HW Bush had an image problem, the wimp factor. Although, once the youngest American fighter pilot in World War II, not to mention former director of the CIA, Poppy, as he was affectionately known had difficulty shaking his aristocratic Northeastern Ivy League background, which newer members of the party viewed as effete and even effeminate. With the epicenter of the Republican Party moving South and West, and its electoral base becoming more populist, the party was seeking more pugilistic candidates. Fortunately, for Bush, his Democratic opponent, former Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, was a cerebral technocratic leader who never seemed to fully grasp the symbolic aspect to the presidency. He was also a man who wanted nothing to do with cheap ceremonial displays of patriotism and masculine

bravado. In the summer of 1988, Dukakis held a sizable 17 point lead over Bush in the polls. But that was before Bush's political strategist, Lee Atwater, with the help of media consultant Roger Ailes, went to work.

LEE ATWATER: And what does Dukakis do? He's a hypocrite. We all know that. You know it, too. That is reflective of the kind of out of touch crowd they are. They probably set up Brookline eating Belgium endives and quiche out of the can.

NARRATOR: Atwater would orchestrate a strategy that would soon become standard practice in conservative politics and media, positioning Republicans as tough guys, while ridiculing the manhood of Democrats.

GEORGE HW BUSH: He thinks that a Naval exercise is something you'll find in Jane Fonda's Workout Book.

NARRATOR: The 1988 race produced one of the most infamous TV ads in political history.

VIDEO NARRATOR: Bush and Dukakis on crime. Bush supports the death penalty for first degree murderers. Dukakis not only opposes the death penalty, he allowed first degree murderers to have weekend passes from prison. One was Willie Horton who murdered a boy in a robbery, stabbing him 19 times.

NARRATOR: The ad wasn't just colored with the kind of racist dog whistles that conservatives had been relying on since Nixon, it also sent a clearly gendered message that Dukakis was a failed protector who wasn't man enough to be trusted to safeguard law abiding white citizens. Then came two fatal, self-inflicted wounds. The first, immortalized as one of the worst campaign photo ops ever was Dukakis's failed attempt to display his toughness with a ride in an Abrams battle tank. The reaction from the press corps in attendance said it all. As writer Steven Dukatt observed, instead of the formidable, battle-hardened leather neck he wished to present himself as, Dukakis looked more like a frightened four-year-old boy on his first bumper car ride. Something Lee Atwater and other Bush operatives were only too willing to exploit, running a devastating ad that ridiculed Dukakis's manhood and countered his efforts to challenge bloated Republican military budgets.

VIDEO NARRATOR: And now he wants to be our Commander in Chief. America can't afford that risk.

NARRATOR: The second self-inflicted wound would come in the form of a question during the debates.

DEBATE MODERATOR: Governor, if Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?

MICHAEL DUKAKIS: No, I don't, Bernard. And I think you know that I've opposed the death penalty during all of my life. I don't see any evidence that this is a deterrent. And I think there are better and more effective ways to deal with violent crime.

NARRATOR: Dukakis's measured and rational response to his wife's hypothetical rape and murder only reinforced the perception of him as an inadequate protector, and not tough enough for the job. Bush ended up with 63% of the white male vote and trounced Dukakis in a 40 state landslide. A message was being sent loud and clear to white men, that a real man wouldn't even consider voting for a Democrat.

BILL CLINTON

BILL CLINTON: If you get somebody who's really bad, I think capital punishment's appropriate.

NARRATOR: In 1991, the new Democrats burst onto the American political scene with the candidacy of Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton and Senator Al Gore from Tennessee. With a goal to win back white working and middle class voters by moving the party to the right.

VIDEO NARRATOR: They're a new generation of Democrats, Bill Clinton and Al Gore. And they don't think the way the old Democratic Party did. They've called for an end to welfare as we know it. So welfare can be a second chance, not a way of life. They've sent a strong signal to criminals by supporting the death penalty.

NARRATOR: Taking a page from the Nixon-Reagan playbook, Clinton signaled his commitment to self-reliance and rugged individualism by calling for cuts to the welfare system.

BILL CLINTON: When you can, you must work, because welfare should be a second chance, not a way of life. An America where we end welfare as we know it.

NARRATOR: Even more dramatically, he proposed a series of harsh new law and order initiatives to send the message that Democrats were serious about getting tough again.

BILL CLINTON: Put 100,000 new police officers on the streets of American cities.

NARRATOR: And imposing severe new sentencing requirements on violent criminals. While the racial subtext was hard to miss, few took note of the deliberate strategy to appeal to white men by manning up the Democratic party. Clinton then went out of his way to signal his commitment to the death penalty, an issue that had emerged as a litmus test for whether a politician had the guts to hold criminals accountable. Stepping

off the campaign trail, he traveled back to Arkansas to sign the death warrant for Ricky Ray Rector, an African-American man convicted of murder whose brain had been damaged during the commission of his crime.

BILL CLINTON: I'm just going home.

REPORTER: You're going to Arkansas?

BILL CLINTON: Yeah. We've got an execution tomorrow, and I always--

NARRATOR: Sending an unambiguous message to voters that, unlike his Democratic predecessors, Bill Clinton was up to the task.

REPORTER: Is it inhumane to execute someone who has mental retardation?

BILL CLINTON: That was not the finding of the courts.

NARRATOR: Clinton's strategy of adopting hardline positions on crime and welfare proved to be a winning one. And in 1994, Clinton made good on his campaign promise, signing into law the largest crime bill in American history, which ushered in the highest incarceration rate in the world and dominance of the prison-industrial system. But Clinton's efforts to rebrand the Democratic party did little to curb the growing right wing backlash against social and cultural liberalism. A backlash that found expression in the meteoric rise of right wing outrage radio in the early 1990s led by the enormous popularity of Rush Limbaugh.

RUSH LIMBAUGH: Welcome to the Rush Limbaugh program, a program exclusively designed for rich conservatives and right minded Republicans, and those who want to be either or both.

NARRATOR: A big part of Limbaugh's appeal and the generation of conservative talk radio personalities he inspired was the language of masculine authority. A language that recalled an idealized past and a time with fewer challenges to white men's power.

RUSH LIMBAUGH: I have about had it with the male bashing that's going on in America today. And I'm serious about it. I'm sick and tired of men being thought of as predators, as rapists, as responsible for everything that people think has gone wrong with this society is the fault of men. I'm tired of hostile women. This is all a result of feminist ideology that's just overtaking our society.

NARRATOR: During this era, the rapid expansion of conservative media played a key role in pushing white men and the Republican Party further to the right. It also paved the way for Newt Gingrich.

NEWT GINGRICH: I recognize sadly, that the Washington press corps is all too often the Praetorian Guard of the left.

NARRATOR: An unapologetic practitioner of bare-knuckled politics, who in 1995, became the first Republican Speaker of the House in 40 years, paving the way for an era of hyper-aggressive partisanship and political division that deepened the gender divide. But this tactic of manning up, now being embraced by both parties and its full impact upon shaping presidential campaigns had yet to be seen.

GEORGE W. BUSH

NARRATOR: In 2000, Clinton's Vice President Al Gore ran against the former Republican Governor of Texas George W. Bush. It was no mere coincidence that just prior to announcing his candidacy, George and his wife, Laura Bush quietly purchased a ranch in Crawford, Texas. The ranch provided an ideal backdrop for the aristocratic Bush, educated at the elite schools of Yale University and the Harvard Business School to be reinvented as a man of the people. He would soon be photographed in cowboy hats, driving around in pickup trucks, and clearing brush Ronald Reagan style. Running against the cerebral Al Gore in a campaign described as IQ versus BBQ, Bush beat Gore among white men by 24 points on the way to a razor thin and highly controversial electoral college victory. Then came Bush's 2004 re-election bid against a decorated war veteran, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry.

GEORGE W. BUSH: If America shows weakness or uncertainty in this decade, the world will drift toward tragedy. This will not happen on my watch.

NARRATOR: Against the backdrop of 9/11 and the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq, Bush's re-election bid in 2004 capitalized on our nation's fears and insecurities.

VIDEO NARRATOR: In an increasingly dangerous world, even after the first terrorist attack on America, John Kerry and the liberals in Congress voted to slash America's intelligence operations. And weakness attracts those who are waiting to do America harm.

NARRATOR: And after summoning up terrors of annihilation, Bush's handlers worked hard to portray the president as a real man, capable of keeping the country safe. One of the most memorable ads of the race was Ashley's story, which featured Bush embracing a 15-year-old girl who had lost her mother in the World Trade Center attacks.

VIDEO NARRATOR: Our president took Ashley in his arms and just embraced her.

ASHLEY: He's the most powerful man in the world and all he wants to do is make sure I'm safe and I'm OK.

NARRATOR: The ad ran 7,000 times in the state of Ohio alone, reinforcing the image of Bush as a father protector who would keep the nation safe. His Democratic challenger, John Kerry attempted to steal a page from the Republican Party playbook.

JOHN KERRY: I'm John Kerry, and I'm reporting for duty.

NARRATOR: The Kerry campaign highlighted the senator's military service in Vietnam, which stood in stark contrast with Bush's more dubious stateside stint in the Texas Air National Guard. But right wing operatives beat the Kerry campaign to the punch, creating a narrative that portrayed the decorated Navy Swift Boat Commander as a coward who had exaggerated his claims of service in Vietnam.

VETERAN: John Kerry has not been honest about what happened in Vietnam.

VETERAN: He is lying about his record.

VETERAN: I know John Kerry is lying about his first Purple Heart, because I treated him for that injury.

NARRATOR: These allegations were later proven as false, but the damage had been done and put Kerry on the defensive. He and his handlers tried mightily to counter this narrative by projecting a tough guy image. But more often than not, he's had the opposite effect. Producing a number of embarrassing and even cringeworthy photo ops. In the clearest illustration of the red state, blue state cultural split to date, Bush's second term was ushered in by white male voters, favoring him over Kerry by 25 points.

BARACK OBAMA

NARRATOR: In the wake of the worst economic crash since the Great Depression, the 2008 campaign took place in an atmosphere of great anxiety and near panic. Remarkably, a young cerebral and supremely confident African-American Senator named Barack Obama won the Democratic nomination out of nowhere by calling fears and inspiring confidence. His tough assured talk on the economy registering with a cross section of white male voters.

BARACK OBAMA: Tomorrow, you can choose policies that invest in our middle class, create new jobs, grow this economy so everybody has a chance to succeed. Not just the CEO, but the secretary and the janitor. Not just the factory owner, but the men and women who work the factory floors.

NARRATOR: His opponent was an aging war hero, Republican Arizona Senator John McCain. As a veteran, longtime Senate leader and military hawk, McCain had plenty of traditional masculine street cred. Like all Republican candidates since Nixon, McCain attempted to position himself on the side of the white working class. Aligning with rank and file Americans like Joe the Plumber, even going so far as to invoke his name 21 times in a single debate.

JOHN MCCAIN: Joe. Joe. Joe. Joe the Plumber. Joe the Plumber's out there-- Joe the Plumber-- Joe the Plumber-- Joe. Joe.

NARRATOR: But McCain's transparent attempts to portray himself and the Republican Party as allies of the white working man weren't enough to overcome Obama's broader appeal. Although, he still lost the white mail vote, Obama won with a coalition of the ascendant. Large majorities among women, voters of color, and young people. Becoming the first African-American to be elected president and changing the meaning and imagery surrounding what it means to look presidential forever. The shift was exhilarating to millions of Americans.

BARACK OBAMA: If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, tonight, is your answer.

NARRATOR: But Obama's victory also triggered a fierce backlash. A rising tide of economic grievance and white racial resentment fueled by right wing groups like the Tea Party and the anti-immigrant Minutemen.

MAN: Barack Obama means Antichrist.

MAN: He's absolutely out of his mind.

MAN: You can take five housewives and they would do a better job than the way that they're running this country now.

NARRATOR: And by a coordinated attack on Obama's manhood and strength as a leader by right wing media outlets like Fox News, under the leadership of none other than Roger Ailes.

BILL O'REILLY: The truth is, that at this point in history, President Obama is powerless- - powerless to stop evil aggression.

ERIC BOLLING: While we get President Obama who puts us in a wussification redistribution economy.

SEAN HANNITY: Obama is making this country and every citizen vulnerable to attack.

ERIC BOLLING: I should just stop, because a picture says thousand words. Here's-- watch. Which one do you want leading your country?

NARRATOR: For many on the far right, Obama signaled the alarm that demographic changes in the electorate were diminishing white men's power, perhaps forever.

GLENN BECK: This president, I think, has exposed himself as a guy over and over and over again, who has a deep seated hatred for white people or the white culture. I don't know what it is.

DONALD TRUMP: I want him to show his birth certificate.

WHOOPI GOLDBERG: Why?

DONALD TRUMP: There's something on that birth certificate that he doesn't love.

NARRATOR: And the ground was laid for 2016.

DONALD J. TRUMP

WWE ANNOUNCER: The Donald is here live on Monday Night Raw.

ANNOUNCER 1: Hey, look at this! Donald Trump! Donald Trump!

ANNOUNCER 2: Donald Trump taking down Vince McMahon!

ANNOUNCER 1: Oh, my God.

ANNOUNCER 2: The hostile takeover of Donald Trump on Vince McMahon.

NARRATOR: While Donald Trump's victory in 2016 has been characterized as a radical break with political norms, in reality, it represented the culmination of a decades long Republican Party strategy to brand itself not only as the natural home of tough guys, but also as the party that cared most about the struggles of the white working class men.

REPORTER: Who you voting for?

MAN: Donald Trump.

REPORTER: Who are you voting for?

MAN: Donald Trump.

MAN: Donald Trump.

REPORTER: And you're going to base your decision on what?

MAN: The working class man is going to be in extinction.

NARRATOR: Trump had grown up wealthy, attended private schools, avoided the draft in Vietnam, and left a long trail of failed businesses and bankruptcies in his wake. But like Ronald Reagan before him, Donald Trump had established himself as a master performer with a special gift for tapping into masculine archetypes.

DONALD TRUMP: You're fired. Go. Terrible.

NARRATOR: Harnessing the power of reality television and the tabloids, he cultivated a larger than life image as a quintessential American tough guy businessmen that would serve him well in his run for the presidency. Trump's strategy to win the Republican nomination was simple, first, channel white racial resentment and anti-immigrant hostility.

DONALD TRUMP: When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists.

NARRATOR: And position himself as the strong man who could build a wall and stem the tide.

DONALD TRUMP: We're going to build a wall. We're going to build the wall. We have no choice. We have no choice.

NARRATOR: Then humiliate and ridicule the manhood of his fellow Republicans in a manner straight out of The Apprentice.

DONALD TRUMP: He wants to be a tough guy. he wants to be a tough guy. Don't worry about it, Little Marco. Let me talk. Quiet.

NARRATOR: Whenever he got the chance, Trump presented himself as a fighter, a man's man.

DONALD TRUMP: And he referred to my hands, if they're small, something else must be small. I guarantee you there's no problem. My guarantee.

NARRATOR: He sold himself as a blue collar billionaire who promised to upend the Washington establishment.

DONALD TRUMP: We are going to drain the swamp in Washington, DC.

NARRATOR: He also attempted to sell himself as a champion of white Evangelical Christians, despite his well-known Playboy image. By presenting himself as a John Wayne style fighter, a defender of the faithful, who would also advance their socially conservative agenda.

DONALD TRUMP: We're going to protect Christianity. And I can say that. I don't have to be politically correct. We're going to protect it.

NARRATOR: Once more, building on Richard Nixon's strategy from decades before, he routinely signaled recognition and validation to blue collar white men.

DONALD TRUMP: We love our coal miners. We love our police. Motorcycle people love me. Thank God for truckers.

NARRATOR: Trump's white male supporters couldn't seem to get enough of this old school tough guy persona and glorification of guns and white male gun culture.

DONALD TRUMP: You put me in there, we're going to save that Second Amendment, we're going to save your guns. They're not going to take away your bullets. They're not going to shorten up your magazines. They're not going to do anything. We're going to preserve it. And we're going to cherish it. And that's what we have to do.

NARRATOR: He leaned in to aggressive language in his speeches and tweets, even encouraging violence by his supporters.

DONALD TRUMP: We're not allowed to punch back anymore. I love the old days. You know what they used to do to guys like that when they were in a place like this? They'd be carried out in a stretcher, folks.

NARRATOR: In a world defined by struggles between winners and losers, the strong against the weak, he made a convincing case that he would put America first. Something Hillary Clinton had not and would not do.

VIDEO NARRATOR: In Hillary Clinton's America, the system stays rigged against Americans. Syrian refugees flood in. Illegal immigrants convicted of committing crimes get to stay collecting social security benefits, skipping the line.

NARRATOR: In the general election, Trump waged an unapologetically misogynist campaign against Clinton.

DONALD TRUMP: Do you think Hillary looks presidential? I'm watching television, and I see her barking like a dog, right? She could be crazy. She could actually be crazy. That I cannot stand her screaming into the microphone all the time.

NARRATOR: Openly mocking the first woman nominee of a major party, stalking her on stage, questioning her stamina and strength, and leading chants to lock her up.

CROWD: Lock her up!

DONALD TRUMP: Let's defeat her in November.

NARRATOR: While Clinton had plenty of critics on the left, she had long been the object of scorn and derision on the right. From the time she was a controversial First Lady in the 1990s, to her history making run in 2016, she had been a lightning rod for criticism.

NEWS MONTAGE: Everybody knows Hillary Clinton. / People just don't like her. / I think Hillary's voice makes angels cry. / It reaches a point where every husband in America has heard at one time or another. / I would say that she should rot in hell, but I think she's already there.

NARRATOR: And now, the idea that a feminist woman could become president after two terms of an African-American man was simply too much for some. A conservative writer went so far as to dub 2016, the Flight 93 election. Arguing that the country was being hijacked and real men needed to storm the cockpit in order to save it. Trump's close advisor and strategist, Steve Bannon had a plan to do just that. Bannon recognized early on that Trump's resentment towards the cultural elites, whose respect he'd never been able to earn, aligned perfectly with the rage felt by many white men and bitterness a lot of them had towards feminists, multiculturalists, and other liberal elites they felt were looking down on them.

STEVE BANNON: They think of the working class folks and middle class folks of the country, a bunch of morons. A bunch of idiots. A bunch of rubes. And they fear you because they understand you've had a belly full of it, and you're taking your country back.

NARRATOR: Bannon was especially intent on galvanizing the power of a generation of increasingly alienated young white men, gathering in dark corners of the internet to complain about the forces of political correctness that sought to limit their right to express themselves.

MEGYN KELLY: You've called women you don't like fat pigs, dogs, slobs, and disgusting animals.

DONALD TRUMP: I think the big problem this country has is being politically correct. And I'm not going to say it, because I'm not allowed to say it, because I want to be politically correct.

NARRATOR: Trump and Bannon intuited what men like Roger Ailes and Rush Limbaugh had known for decades, the way to build an audience, especially with disaffected white men was to redirect their frustration and anger away from the very real, yet impersonal forces of global capitalism that left them behind. And point it towards convenient scapegoats like immigrants, people of color, and women.

DONALD TRUMP: Anyone who challenges their control is deemed a sexist, a racist, a xenophobe, and morally deformed.

NARRATOR: And as history has shown us, their instinct was right. In 2016, Trump won with white men across all class lines by a record margin, with the largest gender gap among American white voters in recorded history.

DONALD TRUMP: We won the Evangelicals. We won with young. We won with old. We won with highly educated. We won with poorly educated. I love the poorly educated.

NARRATOR: And while Trump also won the majority of white women, it was the striking margin of victory among white men, regardless of economic status that made the difference.

DONALD TRUMP: I feel like I'm from Alabama, frankly, because I love your values. And those are the values that I believe in. Those are the values-- those are the values that made this country. Those are the values that made this country great.

NARRATOR: It was the culmination of a decades long conservative strategy to speak to the fears, anxieties, and grievances of white men, men who feel increasingly adrift in a changing world.

TRUMP V. BIDEN

NARRATOR: During the 2020 campaign, Donald Trump did his best to position himself as the candidate of law and order.

DONALD TRUMP: I am your president of law and order. Your vote will decide whether we protect law abiding Americans. I don't think the Democrats have the courage to control these people. They're afraid to even talk about law and order. The suburbs are next.

NARRATOR: While his opponent, former Vice President Joe Biden, made the devastating coronavirus pandemic the primary focus of his campaign ads, the vast majority of Trump's ads summoned up images of urban unrest, anarchy, and left wing radicalism.

VIDEO NARRATOR: Seattle's pledge to defund the--

NARRATOR: It was the same fear-based messaging that conservative political operatives, the likes of Roger Ailes and Lee Atwater had pioneered for Nixon, Reagan, and George HW Bush decades before.

OPERATOR: Hello, you've reached 911. I'm sorry that is no--

NARRATOR: The world was a dangerous place. Democrats were incapable of keeping us safe. And we needed a tough guy like Trump in this case, to ensure our safety.

DONALD TRUMP: This American carnage stops right here and stops right now.

NARRATOR: From his very first speech as president, and throughout his first term, Trump played variations on this theme.

VIDEO NARRATOR: The 7,000 migrant caravan crossing Mexico, marching toward our border.

NARRATOR: While most commentary focused on how Trump was stoking racist fears to move white suburban women back to his side, his attempts to position himself as a fighter who would protect America from threats at home and abroad was clearly targeted at white men as well.

CHARLIE KIRK: We may not have realized it at the time, but Trump is the body guard of Western civilization. Trump was elected to protect our families from the vengeful mob that seeks to destroy our way of life, our neighborhoods, schools, churches, and values.

NARRATOR: This longing for old fashioned masculinity was especially pronounced among Evangelicals, who for years had been seeking to roll back women's and gay rights by pushing for the appointment of conservative judges to the federal judiciary. And they saw in Donald Trump just the sort of broad shouldered fighter who could achieve this. Something Vice President Mike Pence, himself a proud Evangelical Christian, never tired of pointing out.

MIKE PENCE: The president that I work with every day, he's someone I'd like to say with broad shoulders. With that broad shouldered leadership. Broad shoulders. Our president is a man with broad shoulders. Broad shoulders.

NARRATOR: The alpha male, tough guy bravado that Trump and his loyalists cultivated was at odds with the fact that he had evaded the draft during the Vietnam War. Not unlike the long line of other tough talking, right wing men before him.

CHIP REID: We begin tonight with growing outrage in the wake of an explosive report claiming the president insulted members of the military who sacrificed their lives for this nation.

NARRATOR: But none of this seemed to hurt his standing with poor and working class white men, who felt their own version of disrespect at the hands of an economy that seemed to be leaving them behind and by a chorus of liberal voices who appeared more interested in blaming white men for America's problems than taking these men and their grievances seriously. It's no coincidence that Trump's rhetoric also seemed to energize and embolden right wing extremists, whose theatrical displays of aggression and violence were staged to send the unambiguous message that white men still matter.

GAVIN MCINNES: The plight of the Western male right now is there is a war on masculinity going on in the West.

NARRATOR: Whether it was the white supremacists who converged on Charlottesville in opposition to the removal of Confederate statues, heavily armed militants protesting public health mandates during a global pandemic, or neo-fascist groups like the Proud Boys who made their presence known at Black Lives Matter protests. The men drawn to these groups and to Trump not only seem to share a worldview shaped by racial resentment and fear, but also the conviction that liberals and the left were continuing to wage a war on American manhood itself.

FACING THE FUTURE

NARRATOR: Over the past 50 years, presidential elections have become a proxy for debates about the state of American manhood and the status of white men in this country. And the consequence has been devastating for ordinary Americans. Tough on crime laws pushed by political leaders of both parties have led to barbaric levels of mass incarceration and the militarization of the police.

America's pervasive gun culture has rendered politicians impotent in the face of the gun lobby, afraid to pass even the most common sense safety measures amid an epidemic of gun violence.

A deep strain of anti-intellectualism, especially in men, has led to the open ridicule of scientific expertise needed to confront the catastrophic consequences of climate change now raging all around us. And fed into the dangerous misconception that men who wear masks during a pandemic are somehow weak.

The pressure to appear strong on defense has led political leaders of both parties to support endless wars and bloated military budgets, pouring billions of dollars into the military-industrial complex, while basic human needs go unmet at home, including the needs of veterans and poor and working class white men.

Tragically, the pain and suffering of ordinary Americans has all too frequently been hijacked by politicians too beholden to corporate interests to fight for legislation that would materially improve the lives of working people. Whether it's universal health care that would help prevent deaths of despair in white working class communities or federal investment and job retraining to help workers adjust to a changing economy, for years now, rather than fighting for systemic change to restore the sense of pride and purpose so many white working class men are looking for, right wing political leaders have offered them symbolic recognition instead. Appealing to them at the level of culture and identity and scapegoating immigrants, people of color, and women as the source of their problems.

We've seen the same dynamics at work in the rise of so-called strong men around the world, authoritarian leaders who are undermining democracy and attacking the rights of women, LGBTQ people, and ethnic minorities. And emboldening plutocrats and oligarchs under the guise of old school toughness and working class populism.

In the end, what all of this points to is the need to fundamentally rethink how we define political strength and toughness, as well as our assumptions around how we define masculinity itself. All we have to do is look at our own history. In the 1960s, the struggle against systemic racism was led by people of color who persevered and put their own lives on the line to secure basic Democratic freedoms. A struggle that continues to this day now joined by growing numbers of white people who aren't threatened by racial justice and equality. In the same way, generations of women have shown incredible strength and perseverance in the long struggle against sexism, misogyny, and unjust patriarchal power accompanied by growing numbers of men of every race and ethnicity who refuse to believe that gender equality somehow diminishes their own strength and power as men.

There's no doubt that the ongoing struggle for equality and the backlash against it will continue to shape presidential elections for years to come. But one crucial question remains, will our vision of the American presidency continue to be constrained by outmoded ideas about gender in power? Or will we finally embrace new models of strength and leadership capable of meeting the unprecedented challenges that lie ahead?

[END]