

ONE OF THE great journalists I know—and one of the great gentlemen—doesn't own an umbrella. If it rains, he enters the building looking as if he just swam ashore. He associates umbrellas with sissies, and I suppose he should know. He fought with the Marines in the Pacific for three years in World War II, including several of the worst island battles. Where hand-to-hand combat is the norm, sissification's a drawback.

What my friend practices every time he gets soaked to his skin, of course, is *machismo*. The word has taken on a bad ring. I once did an electronic data search and found that macho was nowadays used almost exclusively as an adjective to modify some rotten—and often obscene—noun. That, in fact, is the way I remember everyone using it during the mating years of college. A girl would say to her girlfriend, "He doesn't pull any macho crap, does he?" Which meant: "If he's working-class, I don't want him in my bed."

The word "macho" has sprung loose of whatever meaning it had when the Spaniards brought it back from Mexico. It still, however, retains a bit of imagery common to the age of the conquistadors: too-tight trousers, senseless risk-taking, hard drinking, and random violence. Thus, quite naturally, macho came to be a synonym for "working class." And the repudiation of macho is just another way of celebrating the disappearance of working-class virtue.

Not "rationalizing" or "explaining away"—celebrating. There is a whole triumphalist True Folklore of cautionary tales about *machismo*. Tops is the story of the sailors who witnessed the U.S. nuclear tests in the Bikini atoll in 1946, then ignored the stern warnings from their commanding officers not to go ashore. Okay, so they were dumb. So they died. But anytime prior to the Starbucks era,

Honey, Hand Me That Lead Pipe

Christopher Caldwell
on macho men



what woman wouldn't have preferred the guy who rowed ashore to an early death?

And who but the worst snob or the most ethnocentric bigot could profess to be mystified by how *machismo* came about? In the days before the conquistadors established the first Sexual Harassment Hot Line, any Spanish peasant knew the uses of manhood, knew there might come a day when, to protect his wife's or daughter's honor, he'd have to go *mano a mano*, if you will, with some lugnut twenty years younger and a foot taller than he. So far, understood. And yet manhood—that bundle of virtues involving courage, self-definition, and ordering one's family around—is an acquired habit, because it cuts against the urge to run away from

trouble and blend in with the crowd. How do you develop it? Through *machismo*, which is nothing more than manhood practice. You say, "I'm the toughest guy in Aldea Mierda. Watch me set my hair on fire. Watch me drink a quart of whiskey and jump off the third floor of Town Hall." This kind of stunt was indispensable until the working class began to disappear.

What's mystifying is that today, even though we no longer have any roles for which men need to practice, even though we profess to despise macho, we still need a form of it. Crypto-machismo is everywhere. There's cold-macho: The coolest guy on the street in Montreal in January is the guy without the coat. There's sleep macho: We know President Clinton can get by on three hours of shuteye a night because he tells us, and he tells us because he thinks we'll think him manly for it. There's muscle-macho, which most workmen practice: Why carry three boxes of books at the same time when you're getting paid by the hour? And there's rain-macho, which I've already gone into.

Ah, well. Until the day when a woman hears a bump downstairs at 3 A.M. and turns to her husband and says, "You get your sleep, honey; I'll grab the lead pipe and go down and check it out," *machismo* will endure. If we're going through a period in which it's ridiculed, that's only because yuppies are trying to trick the working class into giving up yet another of their precious prerogatives. But talk to someone who's rich enough to, say, own a country house or a private plane, and what will they tell you? "Hey! Watch me dive into that thirty-nine-degree water. Watch me climb on the carriage house! Watch me fly my plane drunk!" ●

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Lady Murderesses

Julia Reed on a place where chivalry isn't dead but some husbands are



ALL MY LIFE I've heard the story of Howard Dyer's Abraham Lincoln. Dyer, the flamboyant, one-armed lawyer from my hometown of Greenville, Mississippi, was one of the state's most famous defense attorneys. The Lincoln was the black Continental he bought with his fee from keeping Erma Abraham out of jail after she blew a hole in the top of her husband's head with a .38 revolver. The car was also a symbol of a simple truth. A woman in the Deep South could, generally, kill her husband and walk away.

"I don't know why people say we're chauvinistic down here," my father has said more than once. "Look at how nice we are to women. A woman can kill her husband in the state of Mississippi and get away with it."

Mrs. Abraham killed her husband in 1966 in Leland, Mississippi, a town of about five thousand people ten miles west of Greenville, and the same place where Ruth Dickens, the wife of a respected cotton broker and planter and a scion of Delta gentry, had hacked up her mama with some hedge clippers eighteen years earlier. Mrs. Dickens actually served some time—matricide is a little touchier than husband-killing—but the governor commuted her sentence after a little more than six years, and she came back to her place in the First Baptist Church, running the nursery and teaching Sunday school.

Mrs. Dickens was still serving her sentence in the state penitentiary when her two daughters were presented to society at the Delta Debutante Ball in

Greenville. But she was able to attend the debutante ball thanks to two ten-day "holiday suspensions" granted by the governor before he simply let her go home for good.

She died six years ago in her Leland home, at the age of eighty-nine, from heart failure, and more than forty years after her release from prison. Her obituary in the *Delta Democrat Times* mentioned her "pioneer Delta heritage," her graduation from Hollins College, her marriage, her extensive church involvement, and her membership in the Leland Garden Club. It did not mention her mother's murder or her time in the penitentiary.

There has always been a double standard for capital cases, and not just in the South. Of the twenty thousand people lawfully executed in this coun-