

Why Republicans Can't Stop Talking About Masculinity

A Q&A with historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez on Josh Hawley, J.D. Vance and why manhood seems to be such a big topic on the right today.



Trump and Hawley | AP Photo/Charlie Riedel

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Republican lawmakers and hopefuls seem particularly interested in the idea of masculinity lately. In a TV [interview](#) earlier this month, Missouri Senator Josh Hawley claimed the left was telling men their “masculinity is inherently problematic.” He also told interviewer Mike Allen he would make masculinity a signature political issue.

Hawley’s comments sounded similar to those of Representative Madison Cawthorn of North Carolina, who went viral last month in a [video](#) calling on mothers to raise their sons to be “monsters.” Today’s culture, Cawthorn said, is trying to “demasculate” all young men “because they don’t want people who are going to stand up.” More recently,

Ohio Senate candidate J.D. Vance sounded similar themes in a series of tweets in which he defended Kyle Rittenhouse, the 18-year-old who was acquitted on Friday of all charges in the shootings of three men in the aftermath of demonstrations in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Vance [tweeted](#) that the trial filled him with “indescribable rage.” “We leave our boys without fathers. We let the wolves set fire to their communities,” he continued. “And when human nature tells them to go and defend what no one else is defending, we bring the full weight of the state and the global monopolists against them.”

According to historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez, this way of talking about masculinity has its roots in conservative evangelical spaces, but it’s going mainstream. Du Mez wrote a book last year called [Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation](#), about how the model of masculinity in evangelicalism went from emulating the qualities of Jesus to emulating those of the actor John Wayne, and how that has shaped culture and politics ever since. Hawley, Vance and Cawthorn all have deep ties to evangelical Christianity and frequently reference the importance of faith in their lives and, especially for Cawthorn and Hawley, in their political philosophies. I spoke with Du Mez about the history of masculinity as an idea in Republican politics and why it’s suddenly so popular. This conversation has been edited and condensed.

Katie Fossett: When you heard these comments from Hawley and Vance recently, given your background and what you study, what did you hear?

Kristin Kobes Du Mez: I’ll start with Hawley. Within conservative evangelical spaces, first of all, there is the idea that masculinity is a God-given thing. When Hawley is talking about an attack on men and saying that the left is attacking manhood and that they hate this country and don’t believe in gender ... all of that sounds very familiar. In white evangelicalism, this has been a refrain for decades now. In evangelical spaces, Christian manhood has long been equated, particularly in conservative circles, with a kind of rugged, militant quality.

Since the 1960s, conservative evangelicals have elevated a more militant ideal of masculinity, one that is both provider and protector. And they have argued that God has created man to fulfill these roles: He’s filled men with testosterone to give them strength, and that testosterone makes them aggressive and they need to channel that aggression for good. That is their God-given duty as men. And so when I heard Hawley talk about courage and independence and assertiveness, that is very similar to how masculinity is discussed in evangelical spaces. Although often rather than assertiveness, they substitute aggressiveness.

This is a kind of reactionary masculinity that emerges in the 1960s and 1970s in conservative evangelical spaces and more broadly in American conservatism. And the context here is important. Coming out of the postwar era, there was the baby boom, and traditional family values were all the rage, at least among the white middle class. Then you have this disruptive moment in the 1960s. You have the civil rights movement, which is particularly disruptive in the American South to the status quo. And you have

the early feminist wave and second-wave feminism in the 1960s — full-swing in the 1970s — and very importantly, the Vietnam War and the anti-war movement.

All of these things are seen to destabilize the social order, and conservatives are particularly concerned. And in all three of these cases, it's the assertion of white, patriarchal authority or power that can restore order. They believed feminism was threatening to emasculate American men, which was leaving the nation weak and unable to defend itself against communism. The anti-war movement — all those hippies, men with long hair, “make love, not war” — was leaving the nation imperiled. The civil rights movement, as well, was seen as a threat. In the American South, particularly to white families, the integration of schools was seen as a threat to white children.

Against that backdrop, this kind of restoration of a rugged American manhood becomes not just popular, but politicized in a very partisan way.

Fossett: Why is this happening now? Is this language around masculinity becoming more useful in political messaging?

Du Mez: I think it is becoming more useful in the wake of the Trump years. Because, of course, it was around before. There's a lot of history, particularly of Republicans, unfavorably comparing Democratic men and masculinity against a stronger, more rugged American manhood. It kind of had a resurgence during the Obama presidency. It was very popular for Republicans to impugn his masculinity and to question his manhood and his strength. Both men and women did this; Sarah Palin went after him in this respect. It certainly isn't something entirely new.

But I think that Trump definitely intensified it, because when you look back to the 2016 Republican primary season, Trump appeared on the stage and nobody really knew what to do with him, but he was able to play into this idea of rugged masculinity, this warrior masculinity, more effectively than any of the other candidates. Most Democrats thought it was laughable.

But he was reckless. He was uncivil. He was crass. He was not going to be cowed by political correctness. He was a bully on a debate stage against other Republicans. And it worked for him. It made him look strong, and it made his opponents look weak. And so you saw them trying to gain the upper hand and try to play that game, but none of them could play it as well as he could because he was completely unrestrained. And I think that because that worked so well, it seems to me that's the playbook, certainly for anybody who wants to take up Trump's mantle.

And then you have J.D. Vance's comments about the Kyle Rittenhouse trial. I think one thing that's important to note is that this rugged masculinity and this conservative vision of American manhood, historically, have been closely linked to Christian nationalism. “We need a strong man who can step up and defend America,” and in terms of Christian nationalism, “defend Christian America.”

When I read Hawley's [speech](#) from the National Conservatism Conference in Orlando, on the one hand, he's praising this [group of African-American men](#) who stepped up and brought order to a high school in Louisiana after reports of fighting on campus. On the other hand, he's also linking the left's attack on manhood with their ideas of systemic racism and structural oppression. All of those ideas he sees us as a threat to America and a threat to, as he calls it, our shared culture, which would really resonate, particularly with his conservative white base. When we look at Vance, he uses some coded language to talk about the "lawless thugs."

Fossett: I saw a Madison Cawthorn [speech from a recent event](#) make the rounds on social media a few weeks ago that seems to fit this pattern.

Du Mez: Yes. In that speech, he called on mothers to raise their young men to be monsters. It's so similar to Hawley's message; he was arguing that culture was trying to "demasculate" our young men, and it — presumably the left — is doing that because it didn't want young men to stand up to it. This resonates with what Hawley was saying, too; he accused the left of sort of trying to make men tolerant and compliant.

It's really important to situate this call for a rugged militant masculinity within a political context, which is the fight against the left. Both Hawley and Cawthorn have participated in calls to "Stop the Steal," and Cawthorn [actually gave one of the addresses](#) on January 6th, just before the Capitol insurrection. He's also gone on record talking about how bloodshed will be inevitable if our elections continue to be rigged. So it's a call to action for young men to have the "backbone," as he puts it in that speech, to stand up and to fight back to defend our liberty at all costs. And he even goes on to say: "There's nothing I would dread more than picking up arms against a fellow American." But essentially, that's where things are headed, he's saying.

There was a [Public Religion Research Institute American Values Survey](#) that came out recently. In that survey, we see that 60 percent of white evangelicals believe the election was stolen. Of those, 39 percent believe that violence might be necessary to save the country. So that's what we're talking about here.

What is also relevant here is that both Cawthorn and Hawley appear to be drawing on the work of Jordan Peterson, a Canadian psychologist and YouTube personality. I think that "monster" quote from Cawthorn is drawing on Peterson in particular. Peterson is sending the same message to young men that they need to be responsible; they need to be assertive; they need to be aggressive. As he [puts](#) it, "If you're harmless, you are not virtuous." And men need to be monsters. That's his word; the hero has to be a monster. He needs to be a controlled monster. But you need to have that danger — that capacity for danger — and then you learn how to control that. Otherwise, you will be too weak to stand up to the oppressors.

So both Hawley and Cawthorn seem to be influenced by Peterson's message, or at least it resonates with them. And Peterson is extremely popular with conservative white men, and young, disaffected men, and so there's a lot of overlap between conservative white

evangelical men and fans of Jordan Peterson. Hawley and Cawthorn seem to be tapping into both of those streams and bringing them together as a political call to action.

Fossett: And Vance's comment [about Rittenhouse] ties into this, too.

Du Mez: Yeah. He's saying: This was a young white man who stepped in when others failed, and when the government failed, and acted to use violence to assert order. And that absolutely fits in with this call to action to defend our liberty at all costs. And like Cawthorn said, it might require bloodshed.

<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/11/21/josh-hawley-madison-cawthorn-jd-vance-masculinity-523136>