

# You Won't Have Uncle Sam to Kick Around Anymore

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*'I had an impulse to go up to her and kick her ribs.'*

—NORMAN MAILER  
*An American Dream*

By Lucy Komisar

"We are not going around looking for opportunities to prove our manhood," declared Secretary of State Henry Kissinger after the Mayaguez incident last May. It was a curious comment for the question had never been asked, and it made it clear that at a level very close to his consciousness, Secretary Kissinger knew that this was precisely what America's reaction had been all about.

The Vietnam war taught us a lesson, it is said. Somehow, arrogantly, blindly, we slaughtered our sons and wasted our treasure on an enterprise that almost everyone now admits was ill-conceived from the beginning. The war also caused appalling hardship, suffering and death to millions of Vietnamese even to the last when, suddenly this spring, the corrupt Thieu Government collapsed.

It was hard to know, however, exactly what lesson our leaders thought they had learned, because President Ford insisted there be no analysis of American involvement in Vietnam. He said that would constitute "recriminations" which could be divisive and certainly unpatriotic.

And so, as remnants of the Asian

victims of the war were being billeted in Army bases around America, our leaders did it all over again, in miniature and in caricature, landing troops on a tiny island and bombing the Cambodian mainland to erase the "humiliation" to this country of the capture of the private merchant ship Mayaguez by a handful of seamen belonging to a government in chaos.

Afterward, President Ford and his advisers exulted. A news magazine called the action "a daring show of nerve and steel," a member of Congress said how good it was "to win one for a change," and editorial writers and journalists complimented the President on his "decisiveness." It was a battle to prove manhood, worthy of a juvenile street gang. America had a bruised reputation, so like the classic bully, it took advantage of the first easy target that came along. And scores of men died.

What have we learned from the Vietnam war? Only to be a more efficient bully and pick on countries we can whip soundly and easily? The Mayaguez incident illustrates not only what is wrong with American foreign policy, but also, in a way that Henry Kissinger suggested, what is a central theme of our culture and an implacable fact of our lives: the machismo factor.

The machismo factor, borrowing a word from Spanish culture that describes the masculine ideal, is the influence of the belief that to be

manly one must be tough, powerful and aggressive; that one cannot show fear or weakness; and that one must be able to dominate women and also other men. It has been part of American tradition from the time of the frontier, through the phallic big stick of Theodore Roosevelt to the foreign policy of the present. And yet, the antiwar critics of American foreign policy have never raised the issue in quite these terms.

They have decried imperialism or militarism, but their criticism has sometimes been flawed by the very

machismo that provokes the policies they deplore.

William James, the philosopher, arguing against militarism at the beginning of this century, sought to convince the public that it could maintain the "martial virtues" through a "moral equivalent of war." He recommended that boys be conscripted to do hard physical labor in mines or on roads or fishing boats to preserve manly toughness and obedience to authority against the threat of softness or effeminacy. The alternative, he warned, would be a society of

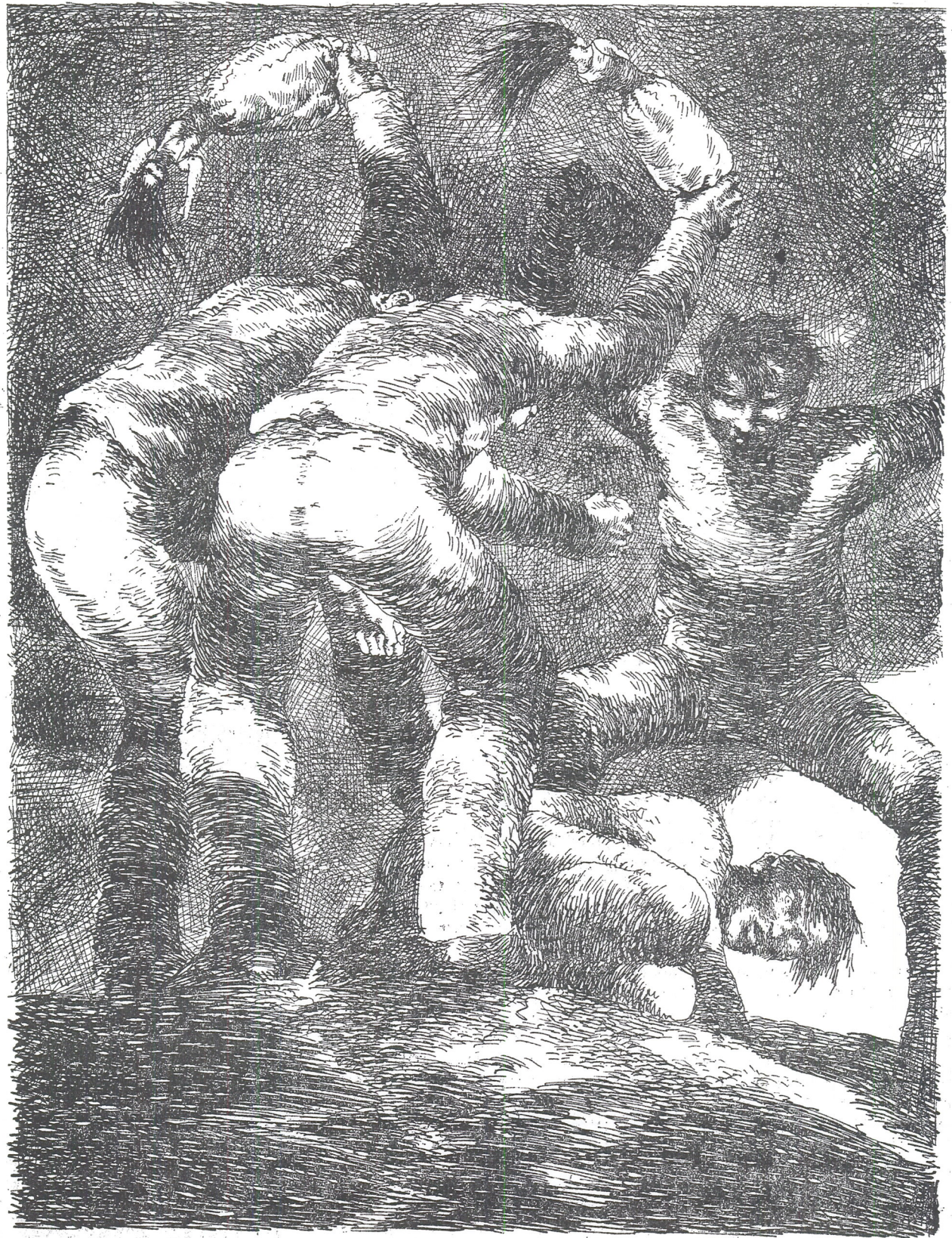
*'A man can be destroyed but not defeated.'*

—ERNEST HEMINGWAY  
*The Old Man and the Sea*

clerks and teachers, coeducation, consumer's leagues, charities and "feminism unabashed."

It was that inability to exorcise the macho ethic that made James' plan so futile, even absurd in its contradictions. And it is "feminism unabashed" that at last has begun to raise the questions that could not be asked by antimilitarists still anxious to preserve "male virtues," by militants who join the Army to prove they are not cowards or by Senate doves who boast about their war records. It is just those "male virtues," the machismo factor, that is the cause of both the sexual oppression that afflicts women and the political and military policies that bedevil humankind. The woman question is the missing link.

There have been hints of that link in the past—hints that violent foreign policies have been used to prove our leaders' and our nation's manhood. As Lyndon Johnson drew the political



battle lines, there were courageous, forceful men on one side, frightened, timid women on the other. And the threat of a defeat was analogous to castration.

In the public and private comments of the men who made the war decisions in the White House, the State Department and the Pentagon, there is a constant reference to the need to show "toughness," to avoid "humiliation," to be "number one"—obsessions that blinded policymakers to the objective facts of the war and the real needs of America.

There is in our society a need for victory and martial reputation, closely tied to the sexual definition of masculinity, that has been taken so much for granted that it has scarcely been challenged.

The machismo factor is the key to an understanding of the Mayaguez incident, the Vietnam war and, until it is altered as it should be, of U.S. foreign policy for years to come.

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