

MAN: a three-letter word meaning ..what?

...every time I see another Coolman, it reminds me of what I keep fighting not to become; it reminds me of what can happen to people, and to a society, when men attempt to prove their virility by abandoning any sense of decency

As a skinny, bookish child of Manhattan's Upper Westside, fantasies of macho domination never claimed much of my time. It was difficult imagining myself a steel-muscled Superman rescuing Lois Lane from Kryptonite-wielding thugs, or a barrel-chested John Wayne taming the West and its frontier hellcat women when a glance at the mirror revealed a potential model for a CARE poster.

What did make sense was another fantasy, different in detail but possessed of the same element of control. This fantasy, which flourished at the time of the New Frontier, was that of Coolman: an utterly rational, utterly unflappable, icily low-keyed crisis manager. Instead of a movie house for its home, this fantasy was lodged between the covers of the news magazines: "Coolman is at his crowded but organized desk at 6:45; by 8 a.m. he has resolved two foreign crises and drafted legislation to abolish poverty; he meets with the Chief Executive seven times a day, each time speaking less than a dozen words to save time; he plays a quick set of tennis, has a 31-inch waistline, reads 2500 words a minute and ruthlessly excises effeminate emotional concerns from his policy judgments. Statistics, purposeful expenditure of time: this is the world of Coolman."

I suppose this was what manhood meant to me—this was the role I could aspire to when I grew up—until I grew up . . . until I began to ask some questions: What did Coolman do with his children, assuming he saw them often enough to recognize them? Did he ever skip a Very Important Meeting (at which it would be decided to have another Very Important Meeting) to spend the morning watching his ten-month-old daughter learning to crawl and talk? Did he ever put off writing his world-shaking memos to stay home so that his wife might leave the confines of a home? What was sex to Coolman? A sharing of sweet lust and affection, or another badge of accomplishment?

And what did Coolman take with them to those Very Important Meetings? Did he ever put down the computer print-outs and the TOP SECRET reports from the other side of the world, to feed into

his coldly rational judgment the cry of a child whose flesh was burned from napalm? Or was that not tough-minded, not manly enough? Did Coolman, or any of his confreres, ever rise up from the table and put aside the talk of options and scenarios, and hit his fist on the table, and say no, we can't do that because it's an inhuman, immoral act?

As it happened, I stumbled into a political life, and I've spent much of the last five years in meetings, strategy sessions, and in lonely fistfights with unyielding typewriters. I can't claim that I've always avoided the Coolman syndrome, but I can claim that I've been lucky—because almost invariably in a campaign there is a pure, one-hundred percent, unadulterated Coolman: someone who's trying to play out his masculine fantasies with "tough, hardnosed politics." (Perhaps you remember the witnesses in last year's Watergate hearings, with their memos boasting of "political hardball" and "picking up yardage.") And every time I see another Coolman, it reminds me of what I keep fighting not to become; it reminds me of what can happen to people, and to a society, when men attempt to prove their virility by abandoning any sense of decency.

Jeff Greenfield

Jeff Greenfield is the author of No Peace, No Place and was a speechwriter for both Robert Kennedy and John Lindsay.

The first thing that comes to mind when I hear the word "masculine" is father

—Paul Mazursky, director

Masculinity is the ability to be weak...the ability to accept one's femininity

—Dudley Moore, actor

Ça n'existe pas!

—Rudolf Nureyev, dancer

and in the recognition of that truth is the great freedom

We can begin to touch each other anew, not as male or female,

