Why men get anxious: On Susan Faludi's Stiffed

by Mart Stewart Van Leeuwen in the Dec 01, 1999 issue

Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man, by Susan Faludi

My father, born at the turn of the century, was too young to see active duty in the First World War and too old to serve in the Second. But as a high school athletics teacher in a small Canadian city he maintained his masculine credentials in other ways. When his school was emptied of younger teachers during World War II, he coached all the boys' athletic teams and directed the high school air force cadet squad while maintaining other classroom responsibilities. After the war, as he got older and retired from coaching, he continued to be a pillar of local and regional sports, serving as a record keeper and league administrator. When he died at the age of 71, cohorts of his past football players flocked to his funeral, and six of them were his pallbearers.

Susan Faludi maintains that since World War II American men have been cheated or "stiffed" out of just this kind of male mentoring (at one point she calls it "maternal masculinity") by the very people and organizations who could and should have provided it. Her list of offenders includes absent and abusive fathers, downsizing corporations, sports team owners too concerned with profit to show loyalty to the cities where teams were first formed, and armed forces too bloated by bureaucracy and careerism to provide the kind of first-among-equals training that helps boys become men with a vision of serving their communities.

In fact, "useful" work for men is harder and harder to come by, Faludi argues. The craftsmanship of the Long Beach naval shipyards has fallen victim to defense budget cuts. The aerospace industry has replaced loyalty to its employees with cavalier worship of the bottom line. The clear and high goals of World War II deteriorated in the chaos of Vietnam. The space program of the '60s and '70s turned skilled fighter jet pilots into passive passengers—"spam in a can." Unionized manufacturing work gave way to low-wage, benefits-poor service jobs, and the current economic boom is

lining the pockets only of those fortunate enough to be in high-tech information industries.

Readers might well ask how representative Faludi's case studies are. Median U.S. household wealth has improved steadily since 1970, and access to cheaper consumer goods has effectively raised most people's standard of living regardless of what their pay slips say. Moreover, even if most men are as downwardly mobile as Faludi implies, women might well be tempted to respond by saying, "Welcome to the club!" Women have a long history of being ghettoized in lower-paying service and clerical jobs, vulnerable to layoffs without warning and often placed in positions that require them to display more image than substance.

But that is precisely part of Faludi's point. As men's capacity to be useful providers and protectors has eroded, many have begun to pursue the precarious routes to self-esteem and financial security long required of women—dressing right, cultivating sexual attractiveness, and looking for ways to get media attention, whether as goofily dressed football fans, gang leaders or iron-pumping gym rats.

"Ornamental masculinity" is the term Faludi coins for this late-millennial phenomenon, one which features some intriguing gender reversals. For example, between 1989 and 1996, men's clothing sales in America rose 21 percent to record highs; in the same period, women, taught by 30 years of feminism to look for less superficial routes to a secure identity, spent 10 percent less on clothing. All this is frequently accompanied by male resentment, directed toward women for supposedly robbing them of what were once male sinecures and for adding insult to injury by having a head start in the art of self-display needed to make it in the celebrity culture.

A minority of men, like those in the Promise Keepers group Faludi observed, strive to find in God the nurturant, affirming father that they lacked at home and on the job. Meanwhile, some watch their marriages crumble and express remorse for resorting to spousal abuse under the strain of their masculine insecurity.

Faludi describes the anxieties and coping strategies of her various informants in sympathetic detail, often with a wry irony which manages to avoid seeming condescending. Even so, I felt mildly stiffed myself in the process of reading her volume. To begin with, it's almost 700 pages long, and despite the author's lively reporting and thoughtful commentary, it's hard to believe she couldn't have made

her case just as effectively in half the space. In addition, as I've already suggested, the book is less about American men in general than about a particular class of men buffeted by the economic and political machinations of even more powerful males who lack an adequate social conscience.

Feminists have long argued about whether the most basic human oppression is a function of gender, class or both. In her previous book, *Backlash*, Faludi opted for gender; in this book it seems that in the end gender gets trumped by class. This is a conclusion she has every right to argue for; but then she might better have subtitled the book The Betrayal of the Working-to-Middle Class (Mostly White) American Man—which, I grant, does not make for a very good sound bite.

But in her final chapter Faludi speculates about a deep wound shared by American men of all classes: the absence—physical, psychological or both—of their own fathers. Everything else—male competitiveness, contempt for women, the desperate search for substitute mentors—may be a form of compensation for early paternal deprivation or abuse (though she is careful to add that this does not absolve men of responsibility for whatever nasty behavior results).

Faludi's journalistic tour of male angst is indeed selective, but in drawing these connections she is in good company. For example, sociologist Scott Coltrane has examined coded ethnographic records of a representative sample of close to a hundred preindustrial cultures. He found that cultures where fathers show the most affection, proximity, and responsibility for routine child care are also the ones most likely to feature females participating in community decision-making and to provide females with access to positions of authority. In a further study he found that in cultures in which men have close relationships to children, they much less frequently affirm their masculinity through boastful demonstrations of strength, aggression and sexual potency. They are less apt to adopt an ideology of female inferiority, or to practice dominating behavior toward women. (See Coltrane's 1996 book *Family Man*, published by Oxford.)

What accounts for such connections? Therapist Frank Pittman, in his 1993 book *Man Enough*, suggests (in opposition to Freud and other gender essentialists) that nurturant fathering, rather than turning boys into stereotypical men, accomplishes the opposite, much healthier result. By reassuring their sons that they are valued and loved as unique individuals, fathers are able to certify them "masculine enough" to get on with the more important business of being human. In other words,

nurturant fathering helps relieve sons of the compulsion to prove themselves adequately masculine by engaging in truculent and misogynist activities, and so frees them to use their energies for acquiring more adaptive and less rigidly gender-stereotyped relational and work skills.

But if this is so, then we are in even deeper trouble than Faludi suggests, since the divorce rate in America is the highest of any industrialized nation and results mainly in single-parent families headed by women. Under the prefeminist doctrine of separate spheres for men and women, most fathers earned their wages away from the home, but at least they lived there. The present sad irony is this: while fathers in intact families are doing (and, it seems, enjoying) more and more hands-on care of their children, there are fewer and fewer intact families.

The solution, as Faludi seems to realize, is certainly not a return to the doctrine of separate spheres, with women relegated to economically dependent domesticity while men bond with each other in male-defined manufacturing jobs and noble military and athletic pursuits. For one thing, a lot of that old-time industrial work contributed mightily to the present ecological crisis—a point Faludi could have developed better than she does. For another, as most of her middle-aged informants make clear, the type of father involvement allowed by the doctrine of separate spheres was too thin (and often too authoritarian) to contribute very positively to the development of children and wives, even though it underwrote men's own masculine status as breadwinners.

While my own father was busy mentoring the next generation of male athletes and cadets, my mother was battling depression and claustrophobia in a household that included two preschool children. She later told me, in a rare moment of candor, that as she watched him leave for yet another summer cadet training camp, she was sorely tempted to tell him not to bother coming home, since he was virtually never around anyway. It was, she implied, a near miss. The survival of the marriage probably owed a lot to the fact that a few years later my mother was able to dust off her own teaching certificate and get back to the classroom to help teach hordes of post-World War II baby-boom children.

Stiffed is long on describing the problem and short on specific recommendations. Readers might want to follow it up with a look at the 1998 joint statement by the Communitarian Network and the Religion, Culture and Family Project (available on the latter's Web site at www2.uchicago.edu/divinity/family). That statement, titled

"The Task of Religious Institutions in Strengthening Families," is sensitive to both the cultural and the structural features of the current gender and family crises. It lauds a range of public, private and religiously based ventures aimed at promoting responsible fatherhood and at educating young people about the benefits of marriage and the communications skills needed to strengthen it. It calls for government and corporate support (in terms of health benefits and tax breaks) of a work week that does not exceed a total of 60 hours for married couples and 30 for single parents. Rather than promoting either a return to the doctrine of separate spheres or rigid androgyny, it suggests the development of a "Homemakers' GI Bill." This would allow either parent who is away from the waged workforce caring for children to receive child-care payments, children's allowances, job training and other protections against long-term financial and job vulnerability.

I am more optimistic than Faludi seems to be about our capacity to reshape a view of masculinity not predicated on compulsive competition or the flight from women and children. Earlier this decade, Andrew Schmookler pointed out that "for thousands of years, human communities have seen the greatest threat to their survival as coming from outside enemies. So they have made warriors their heroes and the virtues of the man of power their ideal of manhood." But now, with arguably the greater threat being what our quest for prosperity is doing to the planet, we need to recover "another ancient image of what a man might be. It is the image of the good steward, the man to whom the care of things can be entrusted" ("Manliness and Mother Earth," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 3, 1991).

To make the image of the good steward seem as manly as that of the vigilant warrior will take a lot of cooperative effort on the part of cultural, religious, corporate and public spheres. But the time is ripe for doing so: that much we have learned in both heartwarming and heartbreaking detail from Faludi's "stiffed" American men.