

The Politics of Martial Manhood



Or, why falling off a horse was worse than falling off the wagon in 1852

We dare not trust the helm to Pierce,
Though in truth he were a Saint,
When conflicts dark their "front unfold,"
We fear that he might—*faint*.

—"Campaign Song for 1852"

In May of 2004, President George W. Bush crashed his mountain bike on mile sixteen of a seventeen-mile ride at his Crawford, Texas, ranch, suffering extensive abrasions to his face, knees, and right hand. Press coverage of this event, like similar awkward incidents (colliding with a Scottish police officer when on a bike in Scotland in July of 2005 at the G8 summit, choking on a pretzel and losing consciousness while watching football on TV in January of 2002), was of limited duration. Late-night comedians moved on to other topics fairly quickly. Even Bush's enemies greeted news of these misfortunes with quizzical wonderment more than glee. Friend and foe of W. alike, it seems, agreed that any number of the president's actions signified more about his character than his ability to stay on a bike or remain conscious after a freak accident.

Not so for Bush's ancestor Franklin Pierce, America's fourteenth president. (Barbara Bush is descended from a second cousin of Pierce.) Like Bush, Pierce lost consciousness after an accident, and like Bush, Pierce proved unable to

remain upright on his nonmotorized transport. But antebellum Americans didn't laugh these mishaps off. Two unfortunate days during the U.S.-Mexican War would haunt Pierce's future political career and presidency, in the process revealing much about the meanings of manhood in the decade before the Civil War.

Pierce was a successful New Hampshire lawyer and former two-term U.S. Democratic representative and senator when Democrat James K. Polk provoked a war with Mexico in 1846. Like thousands of other Americans infused with the ideals of manifest destiny and convinced that Mexico deserved a "drubbing," Pierce volunteered to serve in the war. He enlisted as a private but was promoted to colonel and then brigadier general (although he had no prior combat experience) because Polk was desperate for some officers without Whigish proclivities (the officer corps was as firmly Whig then as it appears to be Republican today). Pierce was part of the final dramatic campaign of the army, a two-hundred-mile trek under the direction of commanding general Winfield Scott from the port of Vera Cruz to Mexico City.



Fig. 1. "Major General Winfield Scott. General in chief, United States Army," lithograph by Currier and Ives (New York, 1846). Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

The army was nearing the capital when Pierce's luck turned south. At the battle of Contreras on August 19, 1847, his horse reared, slamming Pierce into the pommel of his saddle. The resulting groin injury caused him to black out, and he fell from his horse, seriously injuring his knee in the process. His horse also stumbled and went down. Despite his injuries, Pierce somehow managed to mount another horse and fight through the evening, but the next morning, when leading troops into the battle of Churubusco, he twisted the injured knee on the uneven terrain, fainted again, and lay prostrate on the field until the end of the day.

Pierce issued a forthright and detailed explanation for the mishaps, which received wide newspaper coverage. His commanding officers vindicated his behavior and made it clear that a series of unfortunate injuries had understandably and temporarily incapacitated an officer of greater than usual stamina. Pierce's standing within the army doesn't seem to have been hurt by the incident. Indeed, it was Pierce's officer friends from the exclusive Aztec Club who first proposed his name for president in 1852. None the less, the fainting incident became one of the key issues of the 1852 presidential campaign, which pitted Pierce against his old commander, Whig nominee Winfield Scott, a man who never fell off his horse (fig. 1). The *Richmond Whig* was typical in casting its support of Scott in the context of Pierce's Mexico misadventures. Pierce's "known propensity for 'fainting' on the eve of great conflicts" tended "to *demonstrate* to the people that he is not the man for the crisis."

In an article titled "Presidential Qualifications" the *New York Times* focused primarily on the "alleged asphyxia, or fainting fit, which overtook Mr. Pierce at Contreras. It is highly important to know whether the fact is as rumor gives it. Did Mr. Pierce faint? Did he fall? And if so, why?" Was it "physical weakness" or "cowardice" that was "the cause of his being unhorsed"—or unmanned? "Not that weakness under such circumstances would be unpardonable," the *Times* continued, somewhat insincerely, "considering that then, for the first time, the quiet country-lawyer stood face to face with horrid war; then first realized the nauseating smell of gunpowder; then first witnessed the struggle and the death of the soldier; and the profuse effusion of blood everywhere about him. We can very well understand, and understanding, forgive the momentary revulsion of nature at a scene so sickening, but coarser souls will make no allowances."

The Democrats realized the importance of reassuring those "coarser souls" that Pierce was no coward. David W. Bartlett devoted an entire chapter of his 1852 campaign biography *Life of General Franklin Pierce of New Hampshire* to explaining Pierce's fainting episode in Mexico, "because of the base attempt, on the part of some of his enemies, to traduce his military character." In an attempt to put the literally below-the-belt accusations to rest, Bartlett quoted from eight separate testimonials, including General Scott's official report, that the original fall was the fault of Pierce's "restive" horse, that the battle was so strenuous that "many strong men fainted from sheer exhaustion," and that two other general officers were not hurt as badly as Pierce but unlike Pierce, failed to continue fighting.



Fig. 2. "Loco-Foco Hunters Treeing a Candidate" (1852). Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. Click image to enlarge in new window.

What was remarkable was not that Pierce fell from a horse and fainted twice but the extraordinary force of will that allowed him to lead troops into battle after sustaining such serious injuries. "Of all the base inventions of political party presses," Bartlett fumed in his introduction, "the charge of cowardice on the part of General Pierce, while in Mexico, as preferred by certain Whig journals, is the basest." Nathaniel Hawthorne (a college chum of Pierce's who volunteered to write a campaign biography) also recognized the importance of the Mexico issue and addressed it at length in his *Life of Franklin Pierce*, quoting from many of the same sources as Bartlett to prove Pierce was not a coward on the field.

One accusation that neither Hawthorne nor Bartlett chose to address in their works was Pierce's alcoholism. The Democratic candidate's drinking problem was no secret. Like George W. Bush, he had earlier in his political career publically admitted to a problem and taken the temperance pledge on the urgings of his wife, but in Pierce's case it didn't stick. Whigs made surprisingly little of the issue, preferring to label Pierce a coward rather than a drunk, although one of the most lasting slurs called him "the hero of many a well-fought bottle."

Oddly, given the circumstances, none of the accounts of Pierce's fainting episode claimed that he was drunk at the time he fell from his horse, although a few came close. In response to accusations that Scott's civil career could be described in one word, "can't," one wit quipped, "One word describes Pierce's military career, CANTEEN!" And at a public meeting in New York in celebration of Scott's nomination, a Whig officer who served with the two candidates in Mexico recounted that another officer, after being shot in the arm at Contreras, looked about for assistance and "saw a man in the adjoining ditch, dodging the enemy's shots whom he asked for a drink [of water]. The latter handed him a flask, which he took, when to the surprise of his friend he discovered him to be Franklin Pierce."

The same preference for the faint over the bottle is apparent in election-year political cartoons. Some represented Pierce as about to faint, like Currier and Ives's "The Great Footrace for the Presidential Purse," in which Scott, beating Pierce, worries that he might lose the race "if Pierce don't faint." Or "Loco-Foco Hunters Treering a Candidate," in which a treed Pierce tells advancing hunters that "I can't stand the smell of Powder! It makes me faint even to think of it!" (fig. 2). Others showed him in the process of falling off an animal. In John L. Magee's "Game Cock and the Goose" Pierce, barely astride a goose, worries out loud, "O dear me! I shall "Faint," I know I shall "Faint," its "Constitutional!" after Scott, riding a rooster, asks Pierce, "Don't you wish you had my 'Cock?'" (fig. 3). (Yes, the double-entendre would have resonated in the 1850s.) Six of the 1852 election cartoons in the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs collection refer to Pierce's war record; only one, to his alcoholism.



Fig. 3. "Game Cock and the Goose," lithograph by John L. Magee (New York, 1852). Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. [Click image to enlarge in new window.](#)

Election-year slander was not an innovation of the 1850s. Mudslinging was a longstanding tradition that actually predated party politics in the United States, and the accusations of 1852 hardly rose to the heights (or depths?) of 1804 (Jefferson as atheist and father of Sally Hemmings's children) or 1828 (Jackson as bigamist, Adams as pimp to the Tsar of Russia). What makes Pierce's fainting incident notable is neither its meanness nor its illegitimacy but the traction and the permanence of the charge. Scholars have suggested that the 1852 presidential campaign was unusually personality centered because the Whig and Democratic platforms were virtually indistinguishable. Because both parties avoided talking about slavery and accepted the Compromise of 1850, the only way to distinguish between Franklin Pierce and Winfield Scott was on the basis of their characters. This hardly explains why the fainting issue became so prominent, however. It didn't require much effort to identify Pierce's character flaws; not only was Pierce a drunk, but he also gambled. He was a fairly unaccomplished politician, and not even his best friends accused him of

great brilliance. Was it really necessary to revisit an episode of bad horsemanship in the Mexican War in order to discredit Franklin Pierce?

Perhaps it was, particularly if the purpose of the charge was to discredit the candidate among Democrats rather than Whigs. Given the high rates of party loyalty in the Jacksonian era (a pattern that would shift dramatically in the political realignment of the 1850s), parties were more concerned with mobilizing their base than swaying undecided voters. Democrats were far more tolerant of the use and even abuse of alcohol than they were of any "unmanly" behavior that smacked of cowardice. With Whigs the positions were reversed. Scholars of women's partisanship in the antebellum era have revealed a high degree of affinity between literate women and the Whig Party, particularly in the North. Whigs, the party of reform and the temperance movement, were not only more supportive of woman's rights and women's authority in the home than were Democrats, but they also welcomed women's involvement in some aspects of campaigning, like parades.

Democrats, for the most part, wanted nothing to do with female-led reform. Unadulterated patriarchy, both at home and abroad, was their unquestioned ideal. Particularly after the U.S.-Mexican War in 1848, Democrats cultivated an explicitly martial masculinity in an attempt to both unite their party under a banner of territorial expansionism through force of arms and to appeal to working men. The party as a whole was avidly expansionistic and took the lesson of the U.S.-Mexican War—that new lands could be obtained through force of arms—as doctrine. General Frank Pierce was the candidate of Young America, the most aggressively expansionist faction of the Democratic coalition. He wasn't just running for president, he was running for commander in chief in a period when, in the hopes of many Democrats, a new war for territory was just around the corner. Bartlett's campaign biography embraced this position from the outset. "The candid reader will discover General Pierce, as a man and private citizen, to be generous, gentlemanly, and exceedingly attractive in all his qualities of mind and manner. As a soldier he will appear able, courageous and sagacious."

Immediately after the dark-horse candidate Pierce was selected on the forty-ninth ballot at the Democratic convention in 1852, the party began to craft a picture of him as a military leader par excellence, asserting that "no leader displayed greater courage on the blood ground of Contreras and Churubusco than Franklin Pierce." Democrats in Baltimore held a mass meeting to commemorate the battles of Contreras and Churubusco, "when the 'New Hampshire Brigade,' led on by General Franklin Pierce, turned the tide of victory in favor of the American arms." So much was made by Democrats of Pierce's supposedly heroic achievements in Mexico that the *American Whig Review* warned its readers, "Hide your diminished heads in front of the mighty paladin of New England!...Surely the world has been grievously misled, it was Franklin Pierce who captured the Halls of the Montezumas, and not Scott..."



Fig. 4. "General Franklin Pierce," engraving by W. L. Ormsby (New York, 1852). Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.

Given that Pierce was running against the commanding officer of the U.S.-Mexican War, it may not have made sense for Democrats to tout their own candidate's military bona fides, but in light of the party's martial masculinity, Democrats may not have had much of a choice in the matter. This was a party whose members advocated going to war with England over Central America and with Mexico, again, if it would gain new territories for the growing nation. Pierce's own administration advocated going to war with Spain over Cuba. The 1854 Ostend Manifesto, composed by three of Pierce's diplomats in Europe, argued that the United States was "justified in wresting" Cuba from Spain if she wouldn't sell it. So important was it that their candidate project a military image that one of Pierce's main campaign portraits represented him in uniform, on horseback in Mexico (fig. 4).

The Whigs chose a war hero to head their ticket, so they obviously weren't immune to the appeal of martial valor. But because the party was openly opposed to further territorial expansionism, they had less to lose in the revelation that their man wasn't a paragon of bravery. Scott was not without his flaws. Commonly known as "Old Fuss and Feathers," General Scott was mocked by his own troops for his overdeveloped concern with rank and decorum. One might imagine that he was also vulnerable to charges of unmanliness. Certainly he was no man of the people, like his fellow Mexican War hero and Whig presidential candidate, Zachary Taylor, who defeated Lewis Cass in 1848. But strangely enough, neither Democratic political cartoons nor partisan attacks made much of Scott's fussiness, of his weight problem, or of his aristocratic pretensions. His were the feathers of the game cock, not the mother hen (fig. 5).

This is not to say that the Democrats entirely conceded the martial virtues of

their opponent. But when they attempted to turn the tables and accused Scott of cowardice for refusing to fight a duel with Andrew Jackson thirty years earlier, the significance of the different gender dynamics of the parties became clear. Whigs failed to take the bait and claimed that Scott's refusal to duel proved that he was a man of high character, a war hero, yes, but also a man of honorable restraint. There were far more Democrats in the 1850s who still supported the antiquated honor code that justified dueling than there were Whigs. The *New York Times* accurately identified the implications of Pierce's martial qualifications when they noted that the mass of Democrats "expect a man to be as much at home on the battle-field, as if he had been cradled in a mortar, and worn a bomb-shell for a night cap...The mob will hear of nothing else." Thus the significance of the faint. "For a candidate, all of whose recommendations for the office are confined to a single campaign, it is a hazardous thing to have any single item of his diploma disputable."



Fig. 5. "A Bad Egg: Old Fuss and Feathers," engraving by Currier and Ives (New York, 1852). Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.

Ultimately gender had little to do with the outcome of the 1852 presidential election. On the eve of the ultimate collapse of the Whig Party, the hero of "many a well-fought battle" easily won the presidency. Scott may have been the more "manly" candidate, but not even military victory could deliver the Whigs more than four states. Pierce proved to be every bit the vacillating and weak leader that the fainting episode (however unfairly) suggested he might be. And the fainting charge followed him every step of the way. Not simply a cheap shot by desperate Whigs as the Democrats claimed, the faint was embraced by administration opponents of all stripes during Pierce's single term. A series of missteps early in his presidency left some Democrats grumbling at the "editorial labor" it took to promote Pierce as "a tremendous and most frightfully brave general, who never did faint from fear under the blaze and

whiz of the saltpeter and bullets of the enemy." When Pierce sent a war ship to the Mosquito protectorate in Nicaragua to protect Cornelius Vanderbilt's shipping fleet (and a key Central American transit route to the California gold fields) in 1854 and the ship opened fire on the unarmed Atlantic port of Greytown, a number of opposition newspapers sarcastically contrasted this "heroic exploit of the administration" with Pierce's "Mexican laurels."

As Pierce's brief presidential honeymoon came to a close, the attacks grew fiercer. His original Young America supporters were among the cruelest. When Tennessee-born William Walker seized control of Nicaragua with a small band of Americans in the fall of 1855 and installed a puppet government under his own direction, expansionists rejoiced. The possibility that Nicaragua might become the next U.S. state seemed within grasp, but Pierce refused to recognize the filibuster's regime. In this case the fainting episode was resurrected by expansionists, many of them Democratic, to critique "Pierce's feint on Nicaragua," picturing him falling off a horse at the appearance of Walker. One anti-Pierce newspaper inveighed against Pierce's Walker policy and his manliness for months. But when, a few months later, Pierce bowed to the demands of expansionists and changed course, finally receiving one of Walker's ministers in May of 1856, the opposition took the field, so to speak. "How does he act in an important crisis?" the *Columbus Enquirer* asked of Pierce. "Why he falters and halts, and like a *fainting* man falling from his horse he strives to hold himself up, but the fear of opposing powers or the hopes of future reward send him headlong...He was bold then, he faints now..." Nor did the impending close of his presidential career save Pierce from mockery. One writer hoped the Democrats could come up with a better candidate in 1856 than Pierce "with his mighty sword on the memorable fields of Mexico."

Pierce regularly ranks among the very worst of America's presidents, in part because he supported one of the stupidest pieces of legislation in the country's history: the Kansas-Nebraska Act opening up territories north of the Mason-Dixon Line to slavery. Perhaps he doesn't deserve our sympathy. He did, after all, represent himself as a military man in order to convince his Democratic constituency that he would use force in the service of further territorial expansionism. But the illegitimate charges of cowardice in Mexico actually outlived him. Pierce died in 1869 from complications due to cirrhosis of the liver. Ulysses S. Grant devoted a page of his 1884 memoirs to recounting the fainting episodes, condemning the representation of Pierce as a coward as "unfair and unjust" and labeling him "a gentleman and a man of courage." Not surprisingly, given the author's own weaknesses, Pierce's alcoholism again went unmentioned.

What might George W. Bush, and the American electorate, take away from his ancestor's gender troubles? Do candidates with aggressive foreign policy platforms still have more to lose when it comes to projecting a martial image? The devastating right-wing attacks on Jimmy Carter in his final years in office and on every Democratic presidential candidate since suggest not. But one need only consider Bush's flight-suit codpiece in the infamous "Mission

Accomplished" Iraq War photo-op to see how easily a projected martial image can backfire for a president. We may not care much about Bush's ability to stay on a bike, but that airplane carrier may end up being Bush's very own Contreras and Churubusco, the faint that resonates louder than a drinking problem.

Further Reading:

On the role of gender in manifest destiny and territorial expansionism see Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (New York, 2005). On the role of women in the second party system, Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998), and Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, "Whig Women, Politics, and Culture in the Campaign of 1840: Three Perspectives from Massachusetts," *Journal of the Early Republic* 17 (Summer 1997): 279-314. On party alignment and the election of 1852 see Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, 1978) and William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (New York, 1987). On Young America's relationship to Franklin Pierce see Yonatan Eyal, *The Young America Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828-1861* (New York, 2007). Significant biographies of Pierce include Peter A. Wallner, *Franklin Pierce: New Hampshire's Favorite Son* (Concord, N.H., 2004) and Roy Franklin Nichols, *Franklin Pierce: Young Hickory of the Granite Hills*, second ed. (Philadelphia, 1958). Wallner gives more attention to the fainting issue than does Nichols.

Key primary sources for the study of Pierce include David W. Bartlett, *Life of General Franklin Pierce of New Hampshire: The Democratic Candidate for President* (Auburn, N.Y., 1852); Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Life of Franklin Pierce* (Boston, 1852); and the New York anti-Pierce newspaper *Young Sam*.

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