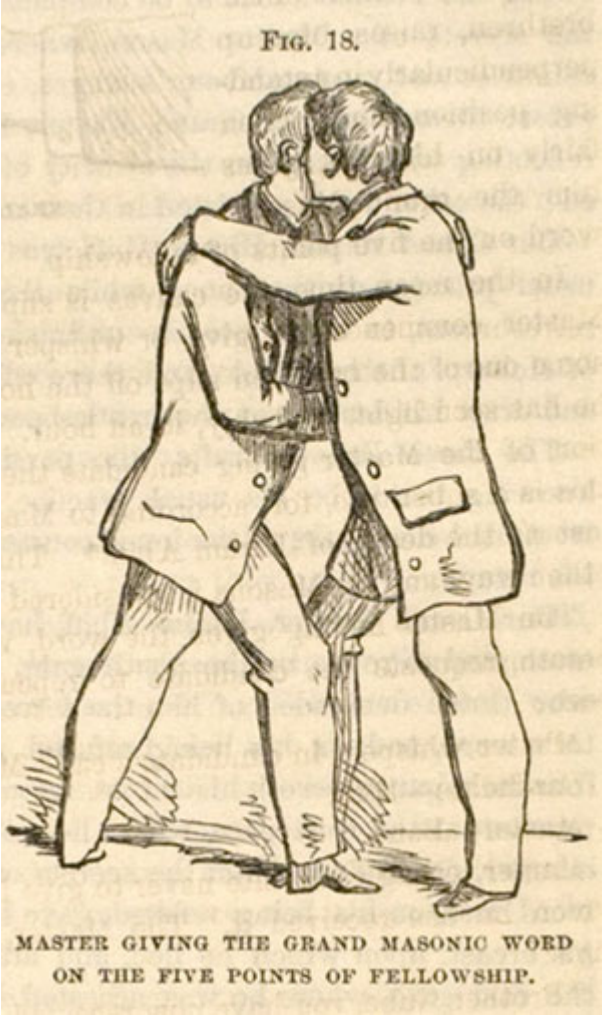
Secrecy and Manhood

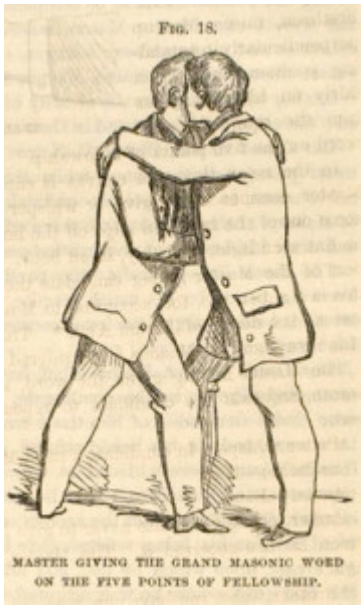


A political romance

Secret commissions, secret prisons, secret deliberations, secret e-mails, even secret public records—secrecy, it seems, is all the rage in executive circles today. With skill and steadfastness, the George W. Bush administration has, in large measure, successfully resisted the efforts of Congress and the courts to compel the release of information related to the internal workings of the executive branch. In inquiries dating to the earliest months of the administration's first term and increasing in tempo until the present-day—rows over Dick Cheney's Energy Task Force, the "torture memo," "Plamegate," the Department of Justice firings, and even more torture memos, just to name a few highlights—the executive branch has consistently and earnestly asserted its right to keep silent, sometimes making a defense out of the venerable doctrine of "separation of powers," other times in the name of "the ability of the president and vice president to receive unvarnished advice." Indeed, despite the Supreme Court's 1974 decision in *U.S. v. Nixon* that "neither the doctrine of separation of powers, nor the need for confidentiality . . . can sustain an absolute, unqualified Presidential privilege of immunity," as well as more

recent judicial decisions condemning certain secrecy policies as “arbitrary, capricious, an abuse of discretion and not in accordance with law,” the administration has not been deterred. It is, unfortunately, impossible to judge just how much the secret has organized the internal operation of the current president. The number of documents classified as confidential, per executive order, remains secret.

Perhaps it should not surprise us that this official reticence has aroused intense suspicion. After all, as Walter Cronkite observed, “you keep secrets from people when you don’t want them to know the truth.” Yet the persistence of the secret as the Bush administration’s central organizational strategy, despite constant threats of investigation by Congress and the press, might suggest something more at work than the practical logistics of hiding embarrassing facts. Looking at the president’s almost reflexive reliance on “confidence” as the yardstick of patriotic commitment—confidence in Donald Rumsfeld, in Alberto Gonzales, in Dick Cheney and his staff—reveals another level of motivation, another modality of patriotism, another political tradition embedded in the secret. For it was in the supreme value of men’s “sacred confidence” (from *con fides*, “with trust”) that an early national generation of big-government conservatives asserted themselves, declaring to an often distrustful populace that men’s secrets were not only defensible but constituted the very measure of the virtuous man. In the energetic vindications of secret societies that erupted after the Revolution; in the closed doors of the 1787 Constitutional Convention; and in the contractual agreements between men, which constituted the only positive right of citizenship until the twentieth century—the partisans of men’s confidence unfolded a vision of the patriotic republic in the intimate spaces between men. To be sure, their audacious claims jarred mightily with the prevailing understandings of secrecy as particularly unmanly and effeminate—cultural notions of the secret that played a pivotal role in uniting revolutionaries in self-consciously manly purpose; it should be no wonder, then, that an emerging anti-federalist opposition would pounce on the delegates to the cloistered Philadelphia convention as debased, fleshy, weak, and womanly, “harpies of power . . . inebriated with the lust of dominion.” And indeed, the unmanly, sexually inverting secret echoes in some of Bush’s more creative critics, finding in Bush’s Skull and Bones Society days the origin of a lifelong effort to obfuscate his alleged schoolboy predilections for homoerotic Satan worship. But for the persistent advocates of disciplined diffidence, the secret did not unman men or even isolate them. It made them, almost incomprehensibly to many, republican men, realizing a manly virtue in the simple and transparent capacity of one man to assess another, to “look into his eyes”—as George W. Bush assessed Vladimir Putin at their first private meeting—and “get a sense of his soul.”



“Master Giving the Grand Masonic Word on the Five Points of Fellowship.” From Malcolm C. Duncan, Duncan’s Masonic Ritual and Monitor: or Guide To The Three Symbolic Degrees of the Ancient York Rite . . . ,” 3rd ed. (New York, [1866?]). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

To be sure, it was no simple task to rehabilitate men’s secrets in the wake of the Revolution. After all, the terrifying possibilities of an unmanning and “mysterious privacy” had been so compelling to the opponents of the aristocratic order and so politically mandatory that even one so self-consciously privileged as John Adams could see in men’s secret pleasures all the “levities, and fopperies, which are the real antidotes to all great, manly, and warlike virtues.” Take, for example, the difficulties faced by the august Society of the Cincinnati. An openly closed band of Revolutionary officers, who took their name from the Roman general famous for beating his sword into a ploughshare, the Cincinnati incited nationwide censure for what appeared as secluded, aristocratic privilege. Certainly the society’s proclivities for luxurious balls, their open consort with the most fashionable women, and their infuriating practice of limiting new members to first-born sons put them in the worst possible light for an early national cultural landscape still enamored with the fantasy of a simple and virtuous republic. And as crypto-aristocrats, a swelling opposition concluded, they were hardly men at all. To Mercy Otis Warren, sister of arch-Whig James Otis and one of the premier chroniclers of the Revolutionary era, the Cincinnati “follow[ed] the fantastic fopperies of foreign nations and . . . the distinctions acquired by titles, instead of the real honor which is the result of virtue.” They were “flattering themselves,” she later confided, or at least the “younger Class particularly the students at Law and the youth of fortune & pleasure.” Rage against these womanly pretenders erupted in mass meetings from Maine to South Carolina, an extended campaign of street politics punctuated by periodic petitions seeking the abolition (or at least supervision) of the order. Some American Cincinnati of esteem kept their distance from the erupting conflagration; George Washington himself, though accepting appointment as the Cincinnati’s first president, carefully steered

clear of meetings and his fellow officers. He understood, perhaps better than most, the unsettling calculus of secrecy and manhood that defined the political culture of the Revolution. For the Cincinnati, however, even the association with Revolutionary heroes could not save their society from withering and persistent attacks from across the emerging United States.

If the Cincinnati failed to realize the great political weight of dark and unmanning secrecy, however, the committed membership of the Free and Accepted Order of Masons did not. Their attention bore considerable fruit, stabilizing the secret society for a period of unprecedented growth in the first decades of the Constitutional republic. Claiming lineage back to the First Temple in Jerusalem, though actually of 1720s origin, Masonry included many of the Cincinnati in their ranks. But these men represented only a tiny fraction of the overall membership scattered in lodges throughout the United States. Disclaiming the self-conscious elitism of the Cincinnati and asserting a relative openness of entrance into their secret brotherhood, Masons were a conspicuous presence in almost every sizable locality in the nation. Masonic lodges were filled with congressmen and senators, assemblymen and sheriffs, assessors, trustees, and constables to such a degree that some even accused the secret society of rigging entire state elections. And, in a moment as famous as it was poetic, the arcane symbols of the secret order were carved into the very founding institutions of the United States, quite literally in the case of the cornerstone of the United States Capitol building. Where the Cincinnati failed to successfully navigate the landscape of manhood and secrecy, Freemasonry proliferated. For the Masonic secret was not effeminate at all. It was, the fictive brothers told themselves and their critics, manly and patriotic, embodying the highest possibilities of the fraternal republic in the tight spaces that opened up between secretive men.

Disavowing the exclusivity and the affectations of the Cincinnati, Masons made no secret of their mysterious secrets—the secret name of God, some claimed, or the secret handshake, or the keys to the secret iconography. Indeed it was almost beside the point, the exact content of the secret. It was, instead, the secret itself that lay at the heart of the fraternal relationship. “The secret is,” wrote one committed Mason in defense of his order’s honor, “to fasten those bonds which ought to unite mankind.” This was, to the otherwise anonymous Benjamin Gleason, a “peculiar privilege”—not a privilege of secret power and sanguine indulgence but of simple fraternity, of fictive consanguinity, of the “appellation brother.” The advocates of manly secrets could hardly keep to themselves the fraternal joy that they felt in their bosom. One Pennsylvania Mason declared in assembly “for that strength which . . . is . . . a Band of Union among Brethren, and a Source of Comfort in our own Hearts.” In almost every Masonic account of the era the language is open, proud, ubiquitous. It is a language of love and tenderness that gave shape to that which could not be exposed, those most mysterious, most secret, most inexpressible spaces of intimate existence at the heart of confidential manhood. No wonder there were no women here. But of course this is much the point of the fraternity, of any fraternity. The secrecy of brotherhood made brothers; men achieved their

highest emotional possibility in republican secrecy.

There was more to the liberation of the secret than a proud brother's tender affections, however. In the eyes of the openly diffident, the reconstructed secret echoed with all the political strategies of the friends of the Constitution. After all, fraternal confidence bound "every party . . . to perform all he promised," unfolding not as the absence of republican ideals but instead as contractual relationship. And, in this light, the fraternal contract reserved for men alone (in most cases) the privilege of entering into that sacred "obligation of contract," which no power on earth, said Article One, Section 10 of the U.S. Constitution, could ever "impair." (It would be good to remember here the preeminence of this "contract clause" in federal rights adjudication, stretching from the first Supreme Court invalidation of state law in the 1792 case *Champion and Dickason v. Casey* to become "for 150 years," as one scholar has suggested, "the quintessential instance of individual rights.") The value of men's transcendent words defined not only manhood itself; it constituted the republic, or at least the republic in the eyes of the Madisonian partisans of "private rights." True enough, though Masons asserted the potential of the secret word to make all strangers into brothers, only the more select could actually utter the inexpressible words; politicians, ministers, successful merchants—these men dominated the order. But this is precisely the point. For the slippage between private property and republican manhood underscored the entire project of reconstructing the secret in the image of men's intimate exchanges. Property and propriety, succor and sociability come together to create a dream of republican liberation written in the vocabularies of friendship and trust, the foundational ethic for a rights order written in the rule of contract. This is the open secret, the secret of fraternal intimacy.

The world of fraternal secrecy, then, did not isolate men, as critics of the Bush administration suggest when they point out "Bush's bubble" to describe his domain of the alienated and confidential. It brought men together in the pure and naked truth of men's confidence. In this compact lay much of what men of ambition had already asserted—that "knowledge, as well as pleasure, must be conveyed by the intimate communication of a personal acquaintance, when the misleading luster of personal deeds is dispersed by free conversation, and nothing intervenes to prevent a clear view of men's real character, properties, and temper." ("I looked into his eyes," to repeat Bush's account of his meeting with Putin, "and got a sense of his soul.") But the work of masculinizing secrecy also demanded, it seemed, that the vestiges of women's effeminizing presence be fully and completely eradicated from the secret. Masonic men thus led a relentless campaign to reconstitute the existence of women under the transcendent domain of fraternal secrecy. After all, warned one 1790s defender of men's sacred secrets, "A more amiable and more victorious invader of our secrets [than inquisitive men] is woman. Armed with beauty, she attacks us by endearment. Unequal to this charming encounter, we surrender our whole souls to be ransacked by her eager curiosity." Such a view was commonplace, another writer opined without reservation, announcing the consensus opinion among his

colleagues. “The evil,” this anonymous scribe penned in 1796, “is said to be more prevalent among the ladies”—a state of affairs that seemed to explain fully why “so many of the sex are averse to their Husbands being freemasons, as their curiosity . . . cannot be satisfied.” Other men were secretive, but only the Masonic secret had value. Even women could agree, or at least one could. “Were our sex admitted into the society, it would counteract the grand design, as we have generally too great a proportion of those delicate feelings, for our own happiness.” Insatiable and burdened with a riotous excess of uncontainable desire, all of these familiar echoes of Eve and the “forbidden apple” make their appearance, just as they did in anxious talk about the power of women to undo the works of men. Yet where earlier generations of fearful men may have burned insolent witches as the symbol of secret and unknowable terrors, the patriotically retiring displaced women entirely from the heart of the secret.

This is not to say that women disappeared from the Masonic imagination, as they have not disappeared from Bush’s domain of confidence. Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice remains a central figure, and Harriet Miers has been associated with the executive’s secret circle. It is just that, for men to associate their own virtuous patriotism with secrecy, women’s own secrets had to be stripped of their unnerving sensuality. In parable and second-hand story and outright admonition, Freemason journals swelled with tales of coquettes, of “beauteous ideot[s]” prattling their insipid, “trickling nonsense.” On this point, one might suspect, most American men would publicly agree. Benjamin Rush, consummate Whig and Mason, made quite clear the republican fear of fashionable women. “The first marks we shall perceive of our declension, will appear among our women,” the famous Pennsylvanian wrote in 1785. He continued, “Their idleness, ignorance, and profligacy will be the harbingers of our ruin. Then will the character and performance of a buffoon in the theater, be the subject of more conversation and praise than the patriot or the minister of the gospel.” As late as the 1840s, Masons thus gathered to denounce women’s “trifling accomplishments,” those “flimsy, airy, trifling, and unprofitable acquirements” of the coquette. After all, as one brother addressed his fellows, “the music of the churn, the Herculean wield of the mop, and the rattling of the dishes are far nobler employments for a young lady, than kicking up her heals at the sound of the merry viol, murdering the French language, of thrumming on the piano.” Sometimes the reformulation of women’s secrets was tantamount to de-sexing them. Secretary of State Rice, for one, has been the unhappy recipient of this sort of criticism. But only with the fearful specter of women’s own pleasures excised from the space of fraternal intimacies, it seems, could secrecy unfold as a central modality of men’s republican liberation.

“Wm. Morgan.” From an original picture by A. Cooley (1829). Frontispiece, Elder David Bernard, Light on Masonry: A Collection of All the Most Important Documents on the Subject of Speculative Free Masonry . . .” (Utica, N.Y., 1829).

In this light, then, the confidence that George W. Bush has shown in his advisors might suggest something other than poor judgment. It might also suggest that the profusion of official claims of confidentiality may appear as assertions of trust, of patriotism, of resolute manhood. To be sure, secrecy’s suspicious opposition should be expected to recoil at such a novel political calculus. Attacks on the manliness of the secretive, after all, remained a staple of early republican oppositional discourse well into the nineteenth century. The sensational 1826 death of apostate Mason William Morgan was only the most famous opportunity to bring the light of publicity on the secretive Masons huddled “till past midnight, in the orgies of the lodge-room.” And such visions of perversion are not completely a thing of the past. To wit: those convinced of George W. Bush’s overwhelming need to hide his expertise in the homoerotic Satan worship of his Skull and Bones days—a thesis distinct from one forwarded by other critics who decry the president’s impulse to obfuscate his own part in the “pedophilia, drug trafficking and consumption, child pornography, bestiality, mind control, rape, torture, satanic rituals and human sacrifices” of a global “Judeo-Masonic” conspiracy. But the point of the reconstructed secret was not about fear, suspicion, or inverted sexuality. For the partisans of the enigmatic, the secret is about being politically born again in the presence of a brother, about resolve and faithfulness, about being a man.

Further Reading:

The secret has long held historians in its power, and they have responded with a half-century’s worth of study on the social and cultural meanings of hidden

power and dark mystery. Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York, 1965) unfolds a tradition of political organization grounded in the psychic fears of loss of status. Thus these seemingly irrational outbursts against unseen forces that have punctuated the American past—whether they be Monarchists, banks, or Communists—unfold as a durable, almost peculiarly American political tradition. This mania for conspiratorial secrets, especially during Revolutionary times, did not necessarily mean that "American Revolutionaries [were] mentally disturbed," as Gordon Wood tells us in his "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style," *William and Mary Quarterly* 39 (1982). The search for the secret could be an intensely logical act for partisans well schooled in the post-Newton landscape of law and causation where all actions must have a first cause. Markus Hünemörder's *The Society of Cincinnati: Conspiracy and Distrust in Early America* (Oxford and New York, 2006) likewise offers a creative account of suspicion, though one that emphasizes political crisis and not epistemological crisis as the heart of the matter. Yet, despite these efforts to render the suspicions of secret conspiracies as evidence of deductive logic at work, psychic anxiety and social powerlessness remain fundamental to more recent investigations of the secret. For example, see Jane Parish and Martin Parker, eds., *The Age of Anxiety: Conspiracy Theory and the Human Sciences* (Oxford, 2001), Robert Allan Goldberg's *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven, 2001), and Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis, 1999).

Other scholars have explored the proliferation of secret societies in the nineteenth century, focusing particularly on their social, political, and economic functions for men living in unpredictable times. Mary Ann Clawson's *Constructing Brotherhood: Class, Gender, and Fraternalism* (Princeton, 1989), a product of the late 1980s, identifies fraternal societies as schools of sociability for an emerging commercial elite as well as refuges for men in an increasingly feminized culture of sentiment. Mark Carnes's 1991 *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven, 1991) also emphasizes the remedial uses of secret societies, showing them as a creative refuge for the maintenance of a masculine self-consciousness in the face of late nineteenth-century economic and social revolutions. Most recent among influential works on secret societies is Steven C. Bullock's 1996 *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840* (Chapel Hill, 1996). Revolutionary-era Freemasonry, here, served as a training ground for an early national ruling elite, providing a free and open "public sphere" where men of esteem could learn the liberality necessary for the republican statesman.

For examples of conspiracy theories about George W. Bush, see Texe Mars, *Dark Majesty: The Secret Brotherhood and the Magic of a Thousant Points of Light* (Austin, Tex., 2004) and Anthony C. Sutton, *America's Secret Establishment: An Introduction to the Order of the Skull and Bones* (Waterville, Ore. 2003). Concerning George H. W. Bush's secrets, see John W. DeCamp, *The Franklin Cover-Up: Child-Abuse, Satanism, and Murder in Nebraska* (1992).

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