Archive

The New York Times

HOME
HELP
SEARCH
Go to Advanced Search/Archive
Past 30 Days
GO TO MEMBER CENTER
LOG OUT
Welcome, randomruth

This page is print-ready, and this article will remain available for 90 days. Instructions for Saving | About this Service | Purchase History

September 5, 2004, Sunday

ARTS AND LEISURE DESK

How Kerry Became A Girlie-Man

By FRANK RICH (NYT) 1799 words

ONLY in an election year ruled by fiction could a sissy who used Daddy's connections to escape Vietnam turn an actual war hero into a girlie-man.

As we leave the scripted conventions behind us, that is the uber-scenario that has locked into place, brilliantly engineered by the president of the United States, with more than a little unwitting assistance from his opponent. It's a marvel, really. Even a $10,000 reward offered this year by Garry Trudeau couldn't smoke out a credible eyewitness to support George W. Bush's contention that he showed up to defend Alabama against the Viet Cong in 1972. Yet John F. Kerry, who without doubt shed his own blood and others' in the vicinity of the Mekong, not the Mississippi, is now the deserter and the wimp.

Don't believe anyone who says that this will soon fade, and that the election will henceforth turn on health-care policy or other wonkish debate. Any voter who's undecided by now in this polarized election isn't sitting around studying the fine points. In a time of fear, the only battle that matters is the broad-stroked cultural mano a mano over who's most macho. And so both parties built their weeklong infotainments on militarism and masculinity, from Mr. Kerry's toy-soldier "reporting for duty" salute in Boston to the special Madison Square Garden runway for Mr. Bush's acceptance speech, a giant phallus thrusting him into the nation's lap, or whatever. ("To me that says strength" is how his media adviser, Mark McKinnon, forecast the set's metaphorical impact to The Times.) Though pundits said that Republicans pushed moderates center stage last week to placate suburban swing voters, the real point was less to soften the president's Draconian image on abortion than to harden his manly bona fides. Hence Mr. Bush was fronted by a testosterone-heavy lineup led by a former mayor who did not dally to read a children's book on 9/11, a senator who served in the Hanoi Hilton rather than the "champagne unit" of the Texas Air National Guard, and a governor who can play the role of a warrior on screen more convincingly than can a former Andover cheerleader gallivanting on an aircraft carrier.

Not that Mr. Bush is ignorant of the ways of Hollywood. Unlike Mr. Kerry, whose show business pals he constantly derides, the president actually worked in the film business. In the 1980's he lined his pockets as a board member of Silver Screen, which financed Disney movies. Maybe he even picked up a few tricks of the trade along the way. The elevation of Mr. Bush to Rambo, as The New York Daily News dubbed him last weekend, and the concurrent demotion of Mr. Kerry to Corporal Klinger, is a major production, requiring meticulous preparation. It did not begin with the Swift Boat ads.

The early drafts of the script pre-date 9/11. In "A Charge to Keep," his 1999 campaign biography crafted by Karen Hughes, Mr. Bush implies that he just happened to slide on his own into one of the "several openings" for pilots in the Texas Air National Guard in 1968 and that he continued to fly with his unit for "several years" after his initial service. This is fantasy that went largely unchallenged until 9/11 subjected it to greater scrutiny. Since then, the

mysterious gaps in the president's military résumé have been finessed by the dialogue and wardrobe departments, from the invocation of "Wanted: Dead or Alive" (whatever did happen to that varmint, Osama, anyway?) to the "Mission Accomplished" rollout of what an approving Wall Street Journal column described as his "hot" and "virile" flight suit. Of late, Mr. Bush's imagineers have publicized his proud possession of Saddam Hussein's captured pistol, which, in another of their efforts at phallic stagecraft, is said to be kept in the same study where the previous incumbent squandered his own weapon of masculinity on Monica Lewinsky.

But with the high stakes of an election at hand, it's not enough to stuff socks in the president's flight suit. Mr. Kerry must be turned into a girl. Such castration warfare has been a Republican staple ever since Michael Dukakis provided the opening by dressing up like Snoopy to ride a tank. We've had Bill Clinton vilified as the stooge of a harridan wife and Al Gore as the puppet of the makeover artist Naomi Wolf. But given his actual history on the field of battle, this year's Democratic standard bearer would, seemingly, be immune to such attacks, especially from the camp of a candidate whose most daring feat of physical courage was tearing down the Princeton goalposts.

No matter. Once Mr. Kerry usurped Howard Dean, whose wartime sojurn in Aspen made the president look like a Green Beret, the Bush campaign's principals and surrogates went into overdrive. Mr. Kerry was said to appear "French." (That's code for "faggy.") His alleged encounters with Botox and a Christophe hairdresser were dutifully clocked on Drudge. For Memorial Day weekend, the redoubtable New York Post published hypothetical barbecue memos for the two contenders, with Mr. Bush favoring sausage and beer (albeit nonalcoholic) and Mr. Kerry opting for frogs legs, chardonnay and crème brûlée. Ann Coulter, that great arbiter of the marriage bond, posted a column titled "Just a Gigolo" in which the presumptive Democratic candidate was portrayed as "a poodle to rich women." Eventually John Edwards would become "the Breck girl," and Dick Cheney would yank an adjective out of context to suggest that Mr. Kerry wanted to fight a "sensitive" war on terror. (For a translation of "sensitive" in this context, see "French" above.)

But there was still this Vietnam problem. One guy went there, one may have gone AWOL. Enter Karen Hughes. Having helped fictionalize Mr. Bush's wartime years, she now resurfaced to undermine Mr. Kerry's, using her April book tour (for her memoir "Ten Minutes From Normal") to introduce the rhetorical insinuations of mendacity that would surface in the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth assault four months later.

The rest is the rewriting of history. Democrats are shocked that the Republicans have gotten away with it to the extent they have. After all, John O'Neill, the ringleader of the Swifties, didn't serve "with" Mr. Kerry anywhere except on "The Dick Cavett Show." Other members of this truth squad include a doctor who claims to have treated Mr. Kerry's wounds even though his name isn't on a single relevant document and a guy who has gone so far as to accuse Jim Rassmann, whom Mr. Kerry saved from certain death, of being a liar. How could such obvious clowns fool so many? It must be Karl Rove's fault, or Fox's, or a lack of diligence from the non-Fox press.

To some extent, this is true. The connections between the Swifties and the Bushies would be obvious even if the current onslaught didn't mimic the 2000 Bush attack on John McCain, or even if each day didn't bring the revelation of overlapping personnel. When Marc Racicot, the Bush-Cheney chairman, says (dishonestly) that Mr. Kerry has called American troops "universally responsible" for Abu Ghraib, his message sounds coordinated with the Swifties' claim (equally dishonest) that Mr. Kerry once held American troops universally responsible for the atrocities committed in Vietnam.

By turning spurious, unchecked smears into a mediathon, Fox has given priceless nonstop hype to commercials that otherwise would have been seen only in seven small to medium markets, where the total buy of airtime amounted to a scant $500,000. Though the major newspapers, including this one, did vet and challenge the Swifties' claims, aggressive reporting on TV was rare.

But Mr. Kerry, having joined the macho game with Mr. Bush on the president's own cheesy terms, is hardly innocent in his own diminishment. From the get-go he's tried to match his opponent in stupid male tricks. If Mr. Bush clears brush in Crawford, then Mr. Kerry rides a Harley-Davidson onto Jay Leno's set. When the Democrat asks "Who among us does not love Nascar?" and lets reporters follow him around on a "day off" when his errands include buying a jock strap, he is asking to be ridiculed as an "International Man of Mystery." In the new issue of

GQ, you can witness him having a beer (alcoholic) with a reporter as he confesses to a modicum of lust for Charlize Theron and Catherine Zeta-Jones. Presumably the only reason he excluded the demographically desirable Halle Berry is that her Catwoman outfit too closely resembles his own costume for windsurfing.

The flaw in Mr. Kerry is not, as Washington wisdom has it, that he asked for trouble from the Swifties by bringing up Vietnam in the first place. Both his Vietnam service and Vietnam itself are entirely relevant to a campaign set against an unpopular and ineptly executed war in Iraq that was spawned by the executive branch in similarly cloudy circumstances. But having brought Vietnam up against the backdrop of our 2004 war, Mr. Kerry has nothing to say about it except that his service proves he's more manly than Mr. Bush. Well, nearly anyone is more manly than a president who didn't have the guts to visit with the 9/11 commission unaccompanied by a chaperone.

It's Mr. Kerry's behavior now, not what he did 35 years ago, that has prevented his manliness from trumping the president's. Posing against a macho landscape like the Grand Canyon, he says that he would have given Mr. Bush the authority to go to war in Iraq even if he knew then what we know now. The setting may be the Old West, but the words do sound as if they've been translated from the French. His attempt to do nuance, as Mr. Bush would put it, makes him sound as if he buys the message the Republicans hammered in last week: the road from 9/11 led inevitably into Iraq.

The truth is that Mr. Kerry was a man's man not just when he volunteered to fight in a losing war but when he came home and forthrightly fought against it, on grounds that history has upheld. Unless he's man enough to stand up for that past, he's doomed to keep competing with Mr. Bush to see who can best play an action figure on TV. Mr. Kerry doesn't seem to understand that it takes a certain kind of talent to play dress-up and deliver lines like "Bring it on." In that race, it's not necessarily the best man but the best actor who will win.

CAPTIONS: Photos: The faces of battle (or not): George W. Bush in the cockpit of a Texas Air National Guard F-102, and John F. Kerry receiving a decoration for his service on a river patrol boat in Vietnam. (Photo by European Press Agency)(pg. 18)

Copyright 2004 The New York Times Company