The title of America is meaner and delineates the choice for angry white men as not whether or not they can own the title of fascist; their choice is whether or not they will be dragged kicking and screaming into that miserable future, or whether they will walk honestly alongside those they’ve spent so long trying to exclude. By explaining their rage, Kimmel is able to point to a possible future that is healthier, happier, and much less angry.

"Being white and male has brought wider options for so long that many think it’s natural, both among those choosing it and those seeking to cure it. Michael Kimmel has drawn on his life-long love of learning the critical ideas that may produce more than mere options. Focusing on where an array of women is enough to white representatives for a future of a number of power questions, the U.S. men in which form in the U.S. democratic vision in which we now realize that does in the lives of all angry white men—men, women, commitments, and learning book." —GLORIA STEIN, feminist activist and author

"White men still hold most of the power and most of the money, so why do so many of them feel so victimized? In this fascinating, gripping tour of the world of angry white men—Glenn Beck fans, white supremacists, school shooters, neo-nazis right—professor sociologist of masculinity Michael Kimmel shows how ‘aggrieved entitlement’ leads those of us to see groups of men’s injustices, immigrants, blacks, women, government, and above all, women, for a society that is changing fast and, they fear, leaving them behind. No dry academic study, Men and women should read Angry White Men. Women will gain insights into the sources of male anger and women is entirely persuasive. I enthusiastically recommend Angry White Men as a redoubt of angry white men. Why were they so angry? Sociologist Michael Kimmel, one of the leading writers on men and masculinity in the world today has spent hundreds of hours in the company of America’s angry white men—from neo-nazi rightists to young student to white supremacists—to present an answer.

MARTIN DUBERMAN, professor of history emeritus at the Graduate School of the City University of New York

"Women and men should read angry White Men. Women will gain insights into the sources of male anger and women is entirely persuasive. Men, however, will find their masculinity questioned not just about their masculinity. Robin, is in a rapidly changing society. Kimmel believes that women and men will be able to lead more satisfying lives." —ROBERT BONNER, former governor of Vermont, author of The New Frontier Agenda: Defending the Next Revolution for Women, Work, and Family Values, and former White Man Women Can Have and Love.

"As the title hastily, Kimmel is aware that it sounds like, even then, these titles have historically been present and dominant are becoming victim of the fact that themselves slipping between the cracks and falling behind. Kimmel has let drop the lines of their anger and by seeing them, he’s found the strength, he means in that their problems are even as well." —KATHA POLLITT, columnist for The Nation

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ANGRY WHITE MEN
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Absolutism and Its Discontents: State and Society in 17th Century France and England

Revolution: A Sociological Interpretation
ANGRY WHITE MEN

AMERICAN MASCULINITY AT THE END OF AN ERA

Michael Kimmel
For
Amy and Zachary,
always
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PREFACE

American Masculinity at the End of an Era

That bawl for freedom in their senseless mood,
And still revolt when truth would set them free.
License they mean when they cry liberty . . .

—JOHN MILTON, SONNET XII (1645)

Whenever people have asked me about the subject of my new book, I’ve barely managed to tell them the three words of the title before they’ve regaled me with stories of blind rage being directed at them, daily incivility witnessed or experienced, outrage they’ve felt, heard, or expressed. I’ve heard so many recountings of the shouting across the aisles of Congress, the TV talking heads, or the radio ragers. They’ve talked of being enraged at demonstrations, confronted by equally enraged counterdemonstrators. I’ve heard of people behaving murderously on freeways, of my friends being frightened to sit in the stands at their children’s hockey games or on the sidelines of their soccer matches. And nearly everyone has complained about Internet trolls who lurk on news websites and blogs ready to pounce viciously on anyone with whom they might disagree.

And they’ve told me that they’ve found themselves angrier than they’d been. Some were concerned that they’re far angrier than they
remember their parents being. Others have tried to maintain a boundary between political anger and raging against their families, though even there the boundary seems, to some, elusive. “The national blood pressure is elevated,” said my friend Dan, a doctor given toward physiological metaphors. “It’s at a frighteningly high level. Cultural beta blockers are in order.”

This rise in American anger has been widely—and angrily!—noticed. Pundits lay the blame on greedy corporations, gridlocked legislatures, cruel and angry local and state governments, demographic shifts that infuriate the native born, and special interest groups promoting their special interest agendas. Mostly, they blame “them”—some group, organization, or institution that has acted so egregiously that outrage feels justified, righteous. The groups or individuals change; the scapegoating has become a national pastime.

And I admit, I’ve been angry too. I’m outraged by the arrogant religious sanctimoniousness of churches shielding pedophiles. I get impatient waiting on the telephone talking to yet another “menu of options,” rightly indignant when crazed drivers swerve across three lanes of traffic to gain one car length, and aggravated by political gridlock and smarmy politicians. I’m easily ired when receptionists in offices or hosts in restaurants sigh loudly at my innocent request that they actually do their jobs and call the person I’m meeting or find me a table at which to eat. I’m generally not a grumpy person, but sometimes it feels that every other person is either smug, arrogant, infuriating, incompetent, or politically inane—sometimes all of the above.

Often I get angry about politics. How can I not? I’m incensed by intransigent, obstructionist Republicans in Congress who won’t admit the mandate that the president received in his trouncing of Mitt Romney and irritated by a feckless and spineless Democratic majority that can’t seem to seize that mandate. I fume about the inordinate influence a bunch of highly organized gun advocates have over public policy, even when popular opinion swings the other way.

There are other emotions besides anger, of course: anguish when I read of young black boys shot by the police; heartsick for gays and lesbians still targeted for violence by hateful neighbors for loving whom they love; torn apart at stories of women raped, beaten, and murdered, often by the very men who say they love them; horrified when people
are blown up simply for running in a race or children are massacred simply for being at school.

On the other hand, I’m also aware that despite all, it’s probably never been better to be a person of color, a woman, or LGBT in the United States. Yes, old habits die hard, and assumptions may die harder. But it’s a pretty easy case to make that whether by race, gender, or sexuality, America has never been more equal. (Class is another story—and one I will tell in this book.) So I’m also thrilled that I’ve lived long enough to see a black man in the White House, women heading national governments and major corporations, lesbians and gay men proclaiming their love for the world to see.

Let me be clear: I am in no way saying we have “arrived” at some postracial, postfeminist, post–civil rights utopia; and even less am I saying that some switch has been thrown and now men or white people or straight people are the new victims of some topsy-turvy “agenda.” I’m simply saying that women are safer today than they have ever been in our society, that LGBT are more accepted and freer to love whom they love, and that racial and ethnic minorities confront fewer obstacles in their efforts to fully integrate into American society.

To be sure, I’m temperamentally an optimist. As both an academic and an activist, I often think of optimism as part of my job description. As an activist, I believe that through constant struggle, our society can, and will, be shaped into a society that better lives up to its promise of liberty and justice for all. And as an academic, I believe that if I can inspire my students to engage more critically with their world, and help them develop the tools with which they can do that, their lives, however they choose to live them, and with whatever political and ethical orientations they may have, will be better as a result.

Surely, the arc of history points toward greater equality. Slowly, yes, and fitfully. But definitely.

And that comment leads me to a discussion not of the book’s title, but of the book’s subtitle. If this is a book that is about American masculinity “at the end of an era,” what era, exactly, is it that is ending? And why is it ending? And is ending a good thing or a bad thing?

In a sense, these latter questions are too late. I am not chronicling a change that is coming. I’m describing a change that has, in most respects, already happened. It’s a done deal. The era of unquestioned
and unchallenged male entitlement is over. This is a book about those men who either don’t yet know it or sense the change in the wind and are determined to stem the tide.

The end of that era leaves those of us who have benefited from the dramatic social inequality that has characterized American society for so many years—we straight white men—with a choice to make. We know what the future will look like twenty years from now: same-sex marriage will be a national policy (and neither heterosexual marriage nor the traditional nuclear family will have evaporated), at least one-quarter of all corporate board members will be women, universities and even the military will have figured out how to adjudicate sexual assault, formerly illegal immigrants will have a path to citizenship, and all racial and ethnic minorities (except perhaps Muslims, who will still, sadly, be subject to vitriolic hatred) will be more fully integrated.

So our choice is simple: we can either be dragged kicking and screaming into that future of greater equality and therefore greater freedom for all, or go with the tide, finding out, along the way, that the future is actually brighter for us as well. (Data here are plentiful that the greater the level of gender equality in a society—whether in a relationship or marriage—the lower the rates of depression and the higher the rates of happiness.)

This is a book about those men who refuse to even be dragged kicking and screaming into that inevitable future. They are white men who aren’t at all happy about the way the tides have turned. They see a small set of swells as one gigantic tsunami about to wash over them.

It’s about how feeling entitled by race or gender distorts one’s vision.

Racial and gender entitlement knows no class system: working-class white men may experience that sense of entitlement differently from upper-class white men, but there are also many commonalities, many points of contact. White men of all classes benefit from a system based on racial and gender inequality. Whether we are working-class plumbers or corporate financiers, we’re raised to expect the world to be fair—that hard honest work and discipline will bring about prosperity and stability. It’s hard for us to realize that we’ve actually been benefiting from dramatic inequality.

Think of it as if you were running in a race. You’d expect that everyone plays by the same rules—start at the starting line, and run as best you can, and that the fastest runners win the race. You’d bristle if some
groups had a different starting point, were allowed to enter where they pleased, or were allowed to tie others’ feet together—or if some people ran in one direction with the wind at their backs, while the rest of us had to run into a strong headwind.

It may be hard for white men to realize that, irrespective of other factors, we have been running with the wind at our backs all these years and that what we think of as “fairness” to us has been built on the backs of others, who don’t harbor such illusions as “meritocracy” and “fairness,” who have known since birth that the system is stacked against them. The level playing field has been anything but level—and we’ve been the ones running downhill, with the wind, in both directions.

Efforts to level the playing field may feel like water is rushing uphill, like it’s reverse discrimination against us. Meritocracy sucks when you are suddenly one of the losers and not one of the winners. In fact, it doesn’t feel like a meritocracy at all.

We didn’t just inherit privilege as an unexamined birthright. It’s less about the “having” and more about a posture, a relationship to it. Even if we didn’t think of ourselves as privileged, we thought of ourselves as entitled to privilege, entitled to occupy the leadership positions.

Just because those in power are straight and white and male doesn’t mean that every straight white man feels powerful. That’s a logical fallacy as well as politically inaccurate. (The compositional fallacy holds that if all As are Bs, it is not necessarily the case that all Bs are As. The classic example: all members of the Mafia are Italian; all Italians are not members of the Mafia.) But just because straight white men don’t feel powerful doesn’t make it any less true that compared to other groups, they benefit from inequality and are, indeed, privileged.

That is the era that is coming to an end, the “end of an era” to which the subtitle of this book refers. It’s not the end of the era of “men”—as in the misframed debate recently over “the end of men.” It’s the end of the era of men’s entitlement, the era in which a young man could assume, without question, it was not only “a man’s world” but a straight white man’s world. It is less of a man’s world, today, that’s true—white men have to share some space with others. But it is no longer a world of unquestioned male privilege. Men may still be “in power,” and many men may not feel powerful, but it is the sense of entitlement—that sense that although I may not be in power at the moment, I deserve to be, and if I’m not, something is definitely
wrong—that is coming to an end. It is a world of diminished expectations for all white men, who have benefited from an unequal system for so long.

There are still many in this generation of men who feel cheated by the end of entitlement. They still feel entitled, and thus they identify socially and politically with those above them, even as they have economically joined the ranks of those who have historically been below them.

This is a book about those angry white men, men who experience a sense of what I here call “aggrieved entitlement”—that sense of entitlement that can no longer be assumed and that is unlikely to be fulfilled. It’s about rear guard actions, of bitterness and rage, about fingers shoved in the crumbling dikes, trying, futilely, to hold back the surging tide of greater equality and greater justice.

But if this is the end of one era, the era of men’s sense of unquestioned entitlement, it is the beginning of another, the beginning of the end of patriarchy, the unquestioned assumption men have felt to access, to positions of power, to corner offices, to women’s bodies, that casual assumption that all positions of power, wealth, and influence are reserved for us and that women’s presence is to be resisted if possible, and tolerated if not.

There is a way out for white men, I believe, a way for us to turn down the volume, redirect our anger at more appropriate targets, and find our way to happier and healthier lives. The data are persuasive that most American men have quietly, and without much ideological fanfare, accommodated themselves to greater gender equality in both their personal and their workplace relationships than any generation before them. And those who have done so are actually happier about it—happier about their lives as fathers, partners, and friends. It turns out that gender and racial equality is not only good for people of color and women, but also good for white people and men—and, most of all, for our children.

Perhaps that’s what the Greenwich Village writer Floyd Dell was thinking as he sat at his desk on the eve of one of the great woman suffrage demonstrations in New York City in 1916. A well-known bohemian writer, Dell was also one of the founders of the Men’s League for Woman Suffrage, who marched with women in support of their right to vote. In an article published in the *Masses*, called “Feminism
for Men,” he came up with a line that I think captures my argument. “Feminism will, for the first time, allow men to be free.”

Perhaps today we might qualify it a bit and say “freer”—but we’d also add happier, healthier, and a lot less angry.

Brooklyn, New York
May 2013
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This book, like all my work, is part of a conversation, among colleagues, friends, allies, and adversaries who have pushed me to clarify, change, refine, and abandon my arguments. I’m happy to acknowledge them here, sure that they’ll know where they fall on the adversary-to-ally continuum: Harry Brod, Richard Collier, Martin Duberman, Warren Farrell, Debra Gimlin, Donald Huber, Jackson Katz, Mike Messner, Rob Okun, and Sophie Spieler. And I’m grateful to Lillian Rubin and Michael Kaufman for arguing with me about everything, reading every word, keeping me honest, and pushing me beyond where I often felt like going. None of them will agree with everything I’ve written, but I hope each feels I made my case honestly and honorably.

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What enables me to delve into topics that make me so angry, sad, and frustrated is how stable and grounded I feel in my private life. I often feel like I’m in the center of one of those busy street scenes in a digitized movie, where I move slowly and deliberately while the rest of the world rushes by frantically in a sped-up time-lapse framing. Amy and Zachary anchor me, give me a place to stand, and thus a place from which to move. I could not be more grateful, nor love them any more. This is for them.
Introduction

America, the Angry

What happened to the country that loved the underdog and stood up for the little guy? What happened to the voice of the forgotten man? The forgotten man is you.

—GLENN BECK, INTRODUCTION TO GLENN BECK SPECIAL, MARCH 13, 2009

PROLOGUE

“What’s a nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn doing in a place like this?” I ask myself as I slide into my booth at the roadside diner. I’m right off Interstate 81, near Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, along the southern tier of that state’s border with Maryland, near the actual Mason-Dixon line. I’m here to meet “Rick,” a thirty-two-year-old father of three from Shippensburg. I had met him yesterday, and I invited him to meet me for breakfast at the diner so I could interview him.

I had driven to Shippensburg to attend a gun show that was held, as many are these days, in the gymnasium of the local high school. (The schools rent out their facilities to local merchants to raise extra funds.) At the entrance to the show, a long table was filled with literature—some advertising circulars for gun merchants and army/navy supply stores, a couple of catalogs of survivalist gear, and some pamphlets from Patriot groups, some anti-immigrant organizations, and even a
single photocopied informational sheet from David Duke and “today’s Ku Klux Klan” (KKK). “How the government is taking away your rights!” announces one pamphlet.

Rick was standing behind the table, talking with a few other guys. “Is this your stuff?” I asked, picking up the leaflet. The guys turned and looked at me. No one looked especially hostile, though they certainly didn’t look friendly, either. More like “Do I know you?” Like “You’re not from around here, are you?”

“I’m a writer, and I’m on a research trip, and wanted to talk to you.”

They eye me suspiciously. I am not very tall, obviously “ethnic,” older, balding, and wearing a button-down shirt. “What are you writing about?” “Who the fuck are you?” “You Jewish?” “How’d you hear about this?”

“Wait,” I said. “I’ll answer your questions. Yes, I’m Jewish. I’m a sociology professor from New York. I am writing a book about what is happening to white guys like you in our country. I’m really concerned about it.”

“You’re concerned about it!” snorts one guy. “We’re livin’ it. We’re concerned about it.”

“I hear you, really. I’m trying to figure it out. With all the economic changes in our country, and the social changes, I want to understand what’s happening to guys like you. Guys like Joe the Plumber,” I say citing a name that’s now familiar to every American since the 2008 election. (Chambersburg is along that long industrial corridor from Chicago to Harrisburg that flows through Gary, Toledo, Akron, Cleveland, Pittsburgh—and Holland, Ohio, where Joe Wurzelbacher is actually from.)

“Ha!” one guys laughs. “You just try getting a job as a plumber around here these days! There are no fuckin’ jobs at all, ‘cept for Walmart hostess.”

“That’s what I’m trying to understand,” I say. “I want to know how America’s changed and what direction we’re going in.”

“Oh, I’ll tell you,” says the guy I eventually come to know as Rick. “We’re going down the fucking toilet, that’s what. I mean, just look around. There’s illegals everywhere. There’s Wall Street screwing everybody. And now there’s a goddamn . . .” He pauses anxiously, a grimace on his face. Another second goes by; he’s obviously sizing me up. “Oh, fuck it, I don’t care if it is politically incorrect. We got a fucking nigger

2 ANGRY WHITE MEN
in the White House. We’re all screwed. Nobody gives a shit about us guys anymore. It’s all over.”

“That’s what I want to write about!” I say. “I’ll listen to you. Seriously. I won’t agree with you, but hey, that’s not my job. I’m not here to convince you of some blue-state liberal agenda. My job is to understand how you see all this. I promise that I will listen to you. Would you be willing to talk to me?” I say, directly, to Rick.

His pals now look at him. “Yeah, Rick, you go talk to this guy.” “Yeah, I sure as shit don’t want to talk to no Jew.” “Yeah, Rick, go ahead, make his day.”

Rick, now seemingly put up to it by his pals, agrees to meet me the next morning for breakfast.

He arrives on time. (I’ve arrived a half hour early and parked my car a few blocks away.) He slides into the booth across from me. He wears a weathered Pittsburgh Pirates hat, a flannel shirt, open to expose a Confederate flag T-shirt—“I wore this special for you,” he says, laughing at his own joke—jeans, and work boots. He has not shaved. Actually, neither have I.

He orders his breakfast; his coffee arrives. Milk, two, no, three, sugars. I take out my tiny portable tape recorder.

“Oh, shit,” he says. “Are you a fed? I can’t talk to you.”

“No, no, not at all,” I say. I take out my wallet, show him my university ID card. I put away the tape recorder. We begin to talk.

MEET AMERICA’S ANGRY WHITE MEN

Rick is one of the men you will meet in this book, men who feel they have been screwed, betrayed by the country they love, discarded like trash on the side of the information superhighway. Theirs are the hands that built this country; theirs is the blood shed to defend it. And now, they feel, no one listens to them; they’ve been all but forgotten. In the great new multicultural American mosaic, they’re the bland white background that no one pays any attention to, the store-bought white bread in a culture of bagels, tortillas, wontons, and organic whole-grain designer scones. They’re downwardly mobile, contemptuously pushed aside by fast-talking, fast-driving fat cats and bureaucrats. And they’re mad as hell.
You see them pretty much everywhere these days—yet they’re often invisible. They patrol America’s southern border, determined to keep out Mexican immigrants. They tune in to venomous talk-radio hosts who translate economic anguish, psychological distress, and political confusion into blind rage. They swarm into populist Tea Party rallies, hoping to find like-minded kinsmen willing to join with them to turn the country around. Some even take up arms against their own country, establishing semiautonomous enclaves and blowing up federal buildings. And, of course, when threatened by external forces, they muster up their coldest steel-eyed Dirty Harry imitation and say, “Make my day.”

In suburbia, they’re the ones who cut you off on the freeway, screaming with rage if you dare to slow them down. If their kid doesn’t make that suburban soccer team or that heartland hockey team, they’re the ones who rush out onto the field to hit the coach or strangle the referee—or start a fight with another equally enraged dad. They hiss with rage at their ex-wives (and their ex-wives’ lawyers) in family court. Further up the economic ladder, they’re the guys seething in the corner of the corporate “diversity training” workshop, snarling that they are now “walking on eggshells” around the office, or stewing when their company hires a woman or a minority, because, they say, affirmative action is really reverse discrimination against white men. And some of their teenage sons are strolling through deserted suburban train stations at night with a bunch of friends, looking for immigrants or gay men to beat up—or kill.

They are America’s angry white men. Actually, one might say more simply that they’re just America’s white men—they just happen to be angrier than ever before in our recent history. Journalists duly record the decrease in compassion and the increase in untrammeled selfishness, and pundits decry the collapse of civility in political discourse, even as they shout at each other at the top of the best seller lists. One guy’s a big, fat idiot! The other is a big, fat liar! The current political atmosphere in Washington has been called the nastiest and angriest in our history.

The past two decades have witnessed mainstream white American men exploding like never before in our history. They draw their ranks from the middle class (office workers, salaried salesmen) and
the lower middle class (the skilled worker, small farmer, or shop-keeper). They’re the “pa” in the ma-and-pa store, Richard Nixon’s “silent majority,” and “Reagan Democrats.” They’re “Joe Lunchbucket,” and “Joe the Plumber,” and just plain Joe. They feel they’ve borne the weight of the world on their backs, and they can’t hold it up any longer. And now, suddenly, some of these regular guys are re-inventing the American Revolution with Tea Party, Minutemen, and Patriot organizations, while others are further out there, organizing militias and joining survivalist cults, waging war on “feminazis,” rampaging through their workplaces, promoting protectionist and anti-immigrant policies.

They’re listening to angry white men like Rush Limbaugh, Mike Savage, and a host of other radio hosts who lash out at everyone else as the source of their woes. They’re trying to roll back the gains made by women and minorities in corporate and professional life and resisting their entry into the ranks of soldier, firefighter, and police officer. And their sons are either busy destroying the galaxy in their video games or actually opening fire on their classmates.

Some explode at work, “going postal” as they slaughter coworkers, supervisors, and plant managers before, usually, taking their own lives. You’ve heard of “suicide by cop,” where a perpetrator pretends to go for his gun and the police open fire? These guys commit “suicide by mass murder”: intent on dying, they decide to “take some of them with me.”

And when they’re not exploding, they’re just plain angry and defensive. They’re laughing at clueless, henpecked husbands on sitcoms; snorting derisively at clueless guys mocked in ads and reality-TV segments; and snickering at duded-up metrosexuals prancing around major metropolitan centers while they drink cosmos or imported vodka. They sneer at presidential candidates like John Kerry who speak French, eat brie, and drink Chardonnay. They see nothing but feminized wusses who actually support global environmental policies and negotiation and diplomacy instead of “my way or the highway” unilateralism.

Unapologetically “politically incorrect” magazines, radio hosts, and television shows abound, filled with macho bluster or bikini-clad women bouncing on trampolines. These venues are the new “boys’ clubs”—the clubhouse that once said “No Gurls Allowed.”
moments allow these guys, who otherwise feel so put down, so “had,” a momentary feeling of superiority.

Yet few observers notice the gender of these vitriolic legions. Few, if any, couple the increase in American anger with the growing gulf between women and men. The gender gap—politically, socially, and economically—is as large as it has ever been. It’s not “Americans” who are angry; it’s American men. And it’s not all American men—it’s white American men. This is a phenomenon so visible, so widespread, that were it happening with any other group (say, black men or Asian women), it would be discussed incessantly. But precisely because it’s so ubiquitous, so visible, it has received hardly any serious discussion.

Now, it is true, one must say at the outset, that some of the most visible angry Americans these days are women, especially those parading at Tea Party rallies. And the patron saint of American anger at the moment is not former vice president Dick Cheney, sneering arrogantly at all potential opponents, but his daughter Liz, and the seemingly omnipresent Sarah Palin. Palin has become a poster girl for right-wing rage—and I mean that more than metaphorically. She is the Betty Grable of the political Right and the fantasy ideal of thousands, perhaps millions, of red-blooded American men. She’s salty and sexy, vampy and folksy, strong yet slightly slutty.

And the Tea Party, at 59 percent male, is somewhat anomalous on the political landscape. While the men who overwhelmingly populate the ranks of rage rely on some amount of women’s backstage support, the theme of their agitation, the motivation for their mobilization, is a desire to restore or retrieve a sense of manhood to which they feel entitled.

And they’re unmistakably white. Former MSNBC political show host Keith Olbermann called the Tea Party the “White People’s Party,” while Jon Stewart hailed it as “a festival of whites.” It’s ironic, since the election of Barack Obama, the first African American president of the United States, was meant to suggest that America was becoming a “postracial” society. Instead of the predicted “Bradley effect”—in which white voters told pollsters that they were going to vote for Mayor Tom Bradley of Los Angeles, but then, in the privacy of the voting booth, decided they just could not pull the lever for a black man—there was the “Obama effect,” in which more people ended up voting for Obama than told pollsters that they would and afterward congrat-
ulated themselves on having transcended racism. (I call this “prema-
ture self-congratulation.”)

But Obama’s election and reelection have actually elicited the
most viciously racist public discourse—only thinly veiled behind well-
worn code words—in which Tea Partiers and other activists shout racial
epithets at elected members of Congress, and half of those partiers be-
lieve that Obama has usurped the presidency, having been born out-
side the United States. Maybe we should call this version of the backlash
the “reverse Bradley effect”—having now declared ourselves postracial,
suddenly white people have given themselves more permission to ex-
press deep-seated racism. It’s as if having a specific target for their rage
enables their racism, because they have already congratulated them-
selves for not believing those racial slurs about “all of them.”

And you’d see the same thing at all the other rallies across the
country, rallies where newly formed groups of mostly white men evoke
the spirit of the American Revolution—Minutemen, Patriots, Tea
Party—to express their contemporary rage at immigrants, health care,
and taxation. Populist movements have swept across America before—
most notably at the turn of the last century, with similar contradic-
tory politics, a combination of agrarian socialism and racist nativism.
Then, as now, populism combined anti–Wall Street sentiment and
anti-immigrant sentiment; together, they fueled an agrarian anger at
their “enabling” government bureaucrats.

Populisms are always contradictory, because populism is more an
emotion than it is an ideology. And that emotion is anger.

UNDERSTANDING AMERICAN ANGER

Why should so many white American men be so angry, anyway? After
all, just being Americans, they are among the most privileged people
on earth. Certainly, they are the most privileged group that isn’t part of
a hereditary aristocracy. For one thing, the United States is the world’s
wealthiest country, and we consume more than any other country.
We’re only 5 percent of the world’s population, but we gobble up 40
percent of its resources. One American consumes as much energy as
forty-one Bangladeshis. And although we are experiencing a significant
tax revolt, the share of our gross domestic product that is accounted for
by taxes is third lowest among all Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (better known as OECD) countries, higher only than Turkey, Chile, and Mexico.

And in the United States, white men get the lion’s share of that wealth. Between 1983 and 2009, the top 5 percent of Americans took home nearly 82 percent of all the wealth gain; the bottom three-fifths actually lost 7.5 percent of their income, according to the Economic Policy Institute. ( Doesn’t it seem sort of irrational for that bottom 60 percent to be angry at others in the same boat?)

But being white gives one a boost. In the United States, we get an additional bonus of 22 percent just for being white (compared with black men); compared with Hispanic men, white men’s bonus is 37 percent. And we get a bonus of 28 percent just for being male, compared with white women; compared with black women, it’s a bonus of 35 percent, for Hispanic women 47 percent. That’s right—at least an additional 25 percent just for a Y chromosome and a shortage of melanin. (Ironically, this “masculinity bonus” is virtually invisible because when we calculate the wage gap, we calculate the wages of women or minorities as a percentage of white men’s wages. So what we “see” is the discrimination; for example, white women make 72.2 percent of men’s wages.)

Yes, it’s true that the economic recession—caused by the absence of government regulation of banks making unwise predatory loans and the failure to fund the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, let alone No Child Left Behind (which ran up US debt)—has hit America hard. (It’s equally true that the Angry Class has sided with those financial institutions in opposing the sorts of meaningful regulations that would actually help us.) And yes, it’s true that many Americans have been fed a consistent set of distortions and outright falsehoods, designed to facilitate that bait and switch, exonerated those who got us into this mess, and excoriated those who have been trying to fix it.

Yet the truth is that white men are the beneficiaries of the single greatest affirmative action program in world history. It’s called “world history.” White men so stacked the deck that everyone else was pretty much excluded from playing at all. When those others did begin to play, the field was so uneven that white men got a massive head start, and everyone else had to play with enormous handicaps. Maybe actually having to play evenly matched, on a level playing field, is too
frightening for a gender that stakes its entire identity on making sure it wins every time.

Don’t believe me. Have you seen the brilliant comedian Louis C. K. talk about this? After describing how white people have a unique privilege of being able to travel to any time in history where they’ll always have a table for you, he says, “And I’m a white man,” noting it doesn’t get much better than this. “How many privileges can one person have? . . . You can’t even hurt my feelings!” he giggles.1

Angry is what white men seem to be. With whom are they angry? Why? And why now?

In this book, I try to answer those questions. I’ve traveled all over the country, all to take the pulse of angry American white men. I’ve sought to dissect their anger, their anxieties, the feeling they’ve been cheated out of their birthright. Regardless of their class position, American white men are a nation of Esau’s, and we have the sense we’ve somehow been had. It’s a story of the rage of the American “Everyman.” And I try to take seriously the race and the gender of American anger, by examining several points along a continuum of class—that is, I look at the ways that middle-class suburban anger is beginning to converge with working-class resentment and the agonizing cry of a declining lower middle class. All of these groups of men, in different ways, are experiencing a rage at what they perceive as dispossession.

White men’s anger is “real”—that is, it is experienced deeply and sincerely. But it is not “true”—that is, it doesn’t provide an accurate analysis of their situation. The “enemies” of white American men are not really women and men of color. Our enemy is an ideology of masculinity that we inherited from our fathers, and their fathers before them, an ideology that promises unparalleled acquisition coupled with a tragically impoverished emotional intelligence. We have accepted an ideology of masculinity that leaves us feeling empty and alone when we do it right, and even worse when we feel we’re doing it wrong. Worst of all, though, is when we feel we’ve done it right and still do not get the rewards to which we believe we are entitled. Then we have to blame somebody. Somebody else.

And that’s typically what we do. Listen to Harvard political scientist Harvey Mansfield, in an op-ed essay in the Wall Street Journal. “The protective element of manliness is endangered by women who have equal access to jobs outside the home,” he writes. “Women who do
not consider themselves feminist often seem unaware of what they are doing to manliness when they work to support themselves. They think only that people should be hired and promoted on merit, regardless of sex.” And anthropologist Lionel Tiger, known for his celebration of male bonding, argues that “the principal victims of moving toward a merit-based society have been male.”

But even that doesn’t completely explain things. All these processes were taking place before the current recession. Why? America stands alone as the most powerful country on earth. Prior to the Bush administration’s economic free fall, we had an economic surplus, unemployment was at its lowest rate in decades, the stock and housing markets were booming. And even then, American white men were angrier than they’d ever been, a new, emerging, identifiable voting bloc.

Yes, it’s true that they’ve taken some hits in recent decades, and not simply from the most recent recession. Real income has fallen since the 1990s for white middle-class men, and it’s been pretty flat since the early 1970s. The median household income for a family of four (in today’s dollars) in 1971 was $56,329. Exactly forty years later, in 2011, it was $50,054. That’s right—in real income, the median income has declined by about $6,000. And the big difference between those median households in the ensuing forty years is that now the wives are working. It literally takes two incomes to earn what one income earned for a family forty years ago—and even then, not quite.

One of the men who journalist Susan Faludi spoke with while researching her 1999 book on male malaise, Stiffed, told her, “I’m like the guy who is hanging from the cliff. I’m starting to lose my grip.” Yet he was a middle manager at a large firm, made a very good living, and drove an expensive late-model car. The inequality gap has become an inequality gulf; the chasm of the 1960s is now a likely unbridgeable canyon. Can you blame men for being angry?

A lot of men seem to believe that their only alternative is to draw the wagons into a circle, hoping that a reassertion of traditional ideologies of masculinity—and a return to the exclusion of “others” from the competitive marketplace—will somehow resolve this present malaise. By contrast, I believe that the solutions to white men’s anger lie beyond a psychological balm on their wounded egos. It requires that we both look into the hearts of regular guys, as well as those who feel marginalized, and that we examine the social and historical
circumstances that brought them to this precipice. Only by fusing a psychological and a sociological analysis can we ever hope to break the cycle of anger that impoverishes men’s lives—and endangers them, and everyone else.

ANGRY WHITE KIMMEL? UNDERSTANDING MY POSITION IN THIS BOOK

I’ve spent the past several years talking to these guys. As I have crisscrossed the country, first interviewing younger men on college campuses for my book *Guyland*, and later while crisscrossing it again being interviewed about the book, I’ve also been interviewing these angry white men. I’ve met white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and Klansmen. I’ve talked to devoted followers of angry white male radio, been lectured to by Tea Party activists about a version of American history that bears no relationship to what is taught in school or written in standard textbooks, listened to men’s rights activists rage against feminism, and shared the anguish of divorced dads agonizing over losing contact with their children. I’ve read diaries by and online reporting on the rampage shooters who ultimately took their own lives.

I’ve also logged more hours than is probably healthy reading their blogs, lurking in their chat rooms and following the comments threads on their blog posts, and listening to the collection of radio ragers, especially as they massage anguish and confusion into rage at the “other” and the government that enables minorities to take over “their” country. I’ve even appeared on some of their talk shows.

In this book, I try to look into the hearts and minds of the American men with whom I most disagree politically. I try to understand where their anger comes from and where they think it’s going. I do so not with contempt or pity, but with empathy and compassion. Many of the men I interviewed for this book are not bad men; they’re true believers in the American Dream, the same dream that I inherited, and in which I believe. It’s the same American Dream that Bruce Springsteen sings about in “The Promised Land,” where “I’ve done my best to live the right way / I get up every morning and go to work each day.”

In my interviews with many of them—even Rick and some of his fellow white supremacists—I identified more with their knee-jerk
belief in the American Dream than I do often with the detached cynicism of some of my hipster neighbors. I grew up proud to live in a country that had defeated Hitler and in that part of the country that had fought successfully against slavery. I was proud to believe, as I was taught in primary school, that “America had never lost a war, and never been the aggressor.”

I do not consider myself a breed apart from these men, as if I were a scientist examining the specimens of some esoteric species. Many of us who line up on the other side of the political spectrum understand that anger at our government for failing to live up to its promise and, in fact, for actively enabling those who crush our dreams. I believe that the anger of the American White Man is misguided and misplaced, yes, but it is not blind rage, without reason. Good or bad, many of the men I will discuss in this book are True Believers, and as such they are vulnerable to manipulation. If, as Susan Faludi argues, they’ve been “stiffed,” then they’ve also been had, duped. It is the corporate elites who fund the faux populism of hate radio, border patrols, Tea Partiers, and other groups who are, to my mind, the ones who have contempt for the simple working man.

And thus far, those elites have guessed right. Fed a steady diet of disinformation and misinformation, America’s white men have lashed out at all the wrong targets. They’ve blamed women, minorities, gays and lesbians, immigrants. Some blame the Jews. Some have blamed them generally and joined political movements to close our borders, to set back women’s progress, to oppose sexual equality. And others have lashed out more locally and individually, attacking or killing those who somehow come to personify their grievances.

But unlike those cynical elites, who try to steer them toward their own extinction, and would happily dance on their graves, I believe these men can turn it around. Make no mistake: the future of America is more inclusive, more diverse, and more egalitarian. The choice for these men is not whether they can stem the tide; they cannot. All the Limbaughs and Arpaios in the world cannot put the gender-equality genie back in the bottle. Their choice is whether they will be dragged kicking and screaming into that inevitable future or walk openly and honorably into it, far happier and healthier incidentally, alongside those they’ve spent so long trying to exclude.
UNDERSTANDING WHITE MEN’S ANGER

But first we have to understand that anger, get inside it. For one thing, it’s an anger that knows no class nor originates in a specific class. Whether we’re talking about the white working class—shorn of union protection, stripped of manufacturing jobs that once provided a modicum of dignity with a paycheck, not to mention the hale-and-hearty camaraderie of the shop floor, they’ve watched as “their” jobs disappeared with the closing of the factory gates. Or the lower middle class, that wide swath of small farmers, independent shopkeepers, independent craft workers—plumbers, electricians, contractors—and small businessmen whose livelihoods have been steadily eroded, as the farm crisis of the 1990s consolidated independent farmers into wage workers for agribusiness, as Walmart put local grocery and other retail stores out of business. Even upper-middle-class men, even those with jobs and pensions and health plans, feel ripped off—by affirmative action programs, immigration, welfare, taxation, and the general sense that they’re being had.

What unites all these groups is not just the fact that they are men. What unites them is their belief in a certain ideal of masculinity. It is not just their livelihoods that are threatened, but their sense of themselves as men. Faludi observed in Stiffed that American men have lost “a useful role in public life, a way of earning a decent and reliable living, appreciation in the home, respectful treatment in the culture.” They’re feeling emasculated—humiliated. The promise of economic freedom, of boundless opportunity, of unlimited upward mobility, was what they believed was the terra firma of American masculinity, the ground on which American men have stood for generations. Today, it feels like a carpet being snatched from under their feet.

And it’s not really their fault. Faludi subtitles her book “The Betrayal of the American Man.” Unlike many of her subjects, who cast their eyes down for enemies but their allegiances upward at fictive allies, Faludi is clear that the betrayal has not been the result of an indifferent government doing the bidding of hordes of undeserving “others”—whether women, gays, immigrants, or whomever; rather, it has been perpetrated by the rich, the powerful, the corporate magnates,
the corporate lobbyists and their plutocratic sycophants in legislatures and state houses. Like Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, Faludi observes a paradox of these white men voting for, and identifying with, the very people who are doing them in.

Middle-class white American men were the nation’s first, and remain its most fervent, believers in the American Dream: that anyone can rise as high as their aspirations, talents, discipline, and dedicated hard work can take them. In my earlier book *Manhood in America*, I charted this ideology of the “self-made man,” the single defining feature of American masculinity, over the course of American history. No single group of Americans has clung so tenaciously to those beliefs. No single group has so ardently subscribed to the traditional definition of “what it takes” to make it in America. And no other group has felt so cheated.

*Angry White Men* tells the story of the other side of the American Dream: the futility, the dashed hopes, the despair, and the rage. It tells the story of the rich and famous wannabes, the ones who thought they could invent themselves, reinvent themselves, be even more successful than their fathers. It tells the story of how white American men came to believe that power and authority were what they were entitled to, by birth, and how that birthright is now eroding. Economic and social changes that are bewilderingly fast and dramatic are experienced as the general “wimpification” of American men—castrated by taxation, crowded out by newcomers who have rules bent for them, white men in America often feel like they are presiding over the destruction of their species.

In a sense, of course, they’re right. Or, at least, half right. Although they may choose the wrong targets for their anger—gay men, immigrants, blacks, and women are hardly the cause of their anguish—white men have felt themselves to be falling in recent decades. That 1971 family income that was roughly the same as today’s? Then, it would have bought you a nice house in a good neighborhood with a decent school system, with about half left over for food and clothing and savings. Today, that income buys . . . well, let’s just say it buys a lot less. Most young men will never be able to afford to buy the very house they grew up in—and they know it.

Even more immediately, in the recent economic crisis, just about 80 percent of all the jobs lost since November 2008—a number in
excess of 5 million—were jobs held by men. Economists have been calling it a “he-cession,” since it is so gender skewed. (The Great Depression was equally gendered, incidentally, but with single-breadwinner families, the crisis was experienced quite differently.) There is no doubt that white men have taken a big hit. And they’re more vulnerable: unions, which once offered a modicum of protection, have all but disappeared. Union membership has declined from about 40 percent after World War II to about 13 percent today, and if you remove federal employees, it’s closer to 8–9 percent—which makes the tenacious clinging to traditional ideals of manhood that much more difficult.

An anguished letter to the editor of a small upstate New York newspaper written in 1993 by an American GI, after his return from service in the Gulf War, captured some of this sentiment. The letter writer complains that the legacy of the American middle class has been stolen, handed over by an indifferent government to a bunch of ungrateful immigrants and welfare cheats. “The American dream,” he writes, “has all but disappeared, substituted with people struggling just to buy next week’s groceries.” That letter writer was Timothy McVeigh from Lockport, New York. (McVeigh’s father was a union-protected worker in the steel plants in Lockport; Tim watched as the plants closed.) Two years later, McVeigh blew up the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in what is now the second-worst act of terrorism ever committed on American soil.

Their very adherence to traditional ideals of masculinity leaves so many white men feeling entitled to that dream—and so now they are feeling cheated, unhappy, and unfulfilled. American white men bought the promise of self-made masculinity, but its foundation has all but eroded. The game has changed, but instead of questioning the rules, they want to eliminate the other players. Instead of questioning those ideals, they fall back upon those same traditional notions of manhood—physical strength, self-control, power—that defined their fathers’ and their grandfathers’ eras, as if the solution to their problem were simply “more” masculinity. Yet few, if any, are kings of the hill, top guns, the richest and most powerful. They’re passing on to their sons the same tired and impossible ideals of manliness and the same sense of entitlement. And they will spawn the same growing rage. The cycle continues—unless we recognize it and act both to defuse and to diffuse the anger.