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# Visions of Statesmanship Across *The Atlantic*: Presidential Masculinity and the American Response to Benito Mussolini

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores how hegemonic masculinity forged discourses of modern statesmanship in the United States and Italy in the first three decades of the twentieth century. It unpacks the 'presidential masculinity' of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson and compares these gendered performances of political leadership in the United States to Benito Mussolini's Fascist rule in Italy during the 1920s. In doing so, this article contends that the manliness of these three modern leaders rested on a contrasting of pairs: if Roosevelt embodied the hegemonic ideal of the 'frontiersman-as-president', Wilson personified its 'unmanly', bourgeois-liberal countertype and thereby engendered the initially hospitable view of Mussolini's Fascist masculinity in the United States during the Jazz Age. The article covers the publications in *The Atlantic Monthly* to reveal how the American disillusion with Wilson's liberal internationalism transformed the *Duce* into a Fascist surrogate for Roosevelt. In a decade of political, economic and social upheaval, the transatlantic 'public relations state' in both the United States and Italy discursively positioned Mussolini as the personification of the masculine ideals of acumen, willpower and virility for the American public; a 'Doctor-Dictator' who, akin to Roosevelt, became a symbol of modern manliness that signified stability, progress and reform. In the process, the *Duce*'s Fascist manhood shaped hegemonic ideals of statesmanship across the Atlantic while hinting at the paltry support for the liberal democracies of the West.

In January 1927, the American journalist Irving Cobb interviewed Benito Mussolini (1922–1945) for *Cosmopolitan*, reflecting on the *Duce*'s celebrity status in the United States and on his transatlantic appeal as the Italian doppelgänger of former American President Theodore Roosevelt (1901–1909). Mussolini, who had become Prime Minister of Italy in October 1922, appreciated Cobb's comparison, for he associated Roosevelt's presidency with such traditionally Fascist virtues as strength and willpower:

'Do you know, your Excellency, what a great many Americans call you? They call you the Italian Roosevelt'. By this he was obviously gratified. 'For that', he said, 'I am very glad and proud. Roosevelt I greatly admired'. He clenched his fist. 'Roosevelt had strength – had the will to do what he thought should be done. He had greatness'.<sup>1</sup>

If Cobb did not miss out on Mussolini's predictably Fascist understanding of Roosevelt's leadership, the distinctly masculinist subtext of the *Duce*'s rhetoric went

somewhat unnoticed. This article argues that Mussolini's performance of Fascist masculinity precipitated his peculiar allure with the United States in the 1920s. Following his demise in the wake of the Paris Peace Conference (1919–1920), the liberal internationalism of President Woodrow Wilson (1913–1921) had seemingly gone out of fashion both at home and abroad by the early 1920s, allowing Mussolini to position himself as the personification of political and economic vitality: an 'Italian Roosevelt' for the Jazz Age.

I will look at *The Atlantic Monthly* to discuss the American response to Mussolini and his Fascist movement in the 1920s. How did the *Atlantic's* coverage of the political and ideological transformations in Italy during the 1920s correspond to the American view of Mussolini as 'the regenerator' of the Italian nation? How did discourses of hegemonic masculinity shape the American public's favourable disposition towards *Il Duce*? To what extent did the American idea of 'presidential masculinity' reflect a disappointment with Wilson's liberal internationalism on the one hand, and a longing for Roosevelt's 'frontier masculinity' on the other? This article contextualises the American response to Mussolini's Fascist leadership by analysing these interdependent discourses on hegemonic masculinity. By comparing Roosevelt, Wilson and Mussolini, I reveal how discourses of modern statesmanship shaped the American view of Italian Fascism in the United States. While these three protagonists came from different backgrounds that would condition their ideological disposition once in office, I contend, first, that their modern statesmanship – that is, their position as men at the head of a state – thrived on a transatlantic performance of hegemonic masculinity and, second, that this transatlantic discourse of manly leadership facilitated the considerable appeal of Mussolini and Italian Fascism in the United States in 1920s.

The American response to Mussolini was shaped by an oligopolistic public sphere in both Italy and the United States, which had emerged out of the convergence of corporate mass media, finance capital and the state in the 1910s and 1920s. In the nascent age of commodity culture, this tripartite shared an interest in propaganda on the one hand and advertising and public relations on the other. In the United States, Wilson and Walter Lippmann inaugurated the Committee on Public Information (CPI) in 1917 to rally the American public behind Wilson's plans for a military intervention in the First World War. The CPI's first director, George Creel, a key strategist of Wilson's 1916 re-election campaign, knowingly promoted a 'public relations state' that thrived on an economy of infotainment, publicity and public discourse aimed at the working classes.<sup>2</sup> In like manner, the Fascist regime in Italy established the Istituto LUCE (L'Unione per la Cinematografia Educativa) as a centralised newsreel agency in 1924 and entered into partnerships in the United States – often via its network of embassies – with film studios, newsreel companies, distribution firms and theatre owners in order to halt the dissemination of anti-Italian content on the American screen. Upon the nationalisation of LUCE in 1926, the Fascist apparatus began to intervene more overtly in the international circulation of an 'idea of Italian Fascism' by facilitating distribution and exchange agreements between LUCE and American newsreel companies, such as Fox Movietone and Hearst Metrotone, by offering a free cable transmission to American journalists, diplomats and wire services in Rome and by organising press services (a concoction of Thomas W. Lamont Jr and Martin Egan of J. P. Morgan) that countered anti-Fascist publications across the Atlantic.<sup>3</sup>

The American image of Mussolini flourished in this transatlantic nucleus of public relations, propaganda and advertising. The writings of the *New York Post*'s Percy Winner reflected the overall shift in the American attitude toward the Duce and his Fascist Movement in the 1920s, initially expressing cautious interest but gradually evolving into fierce criticism. The *New York Times* thus condoned Mussolini's *coup d'état* in 1922 but condemned the regime more overtly by the mid-1920s, often drawing parallels between Italian Fascism and Soviet totalitarianism. Weekly and monthly periodicals and magazines predominantly focused on the diplomatic implications of Fascism's nationalist and militarist posturing on the liberal world stage, cautiously supporting Fascism's rule of law and order against the looming threats of 'anarchy' and 'radicalism' brought on by the *Biennio Rosso* (1919–1920). These outlets paled in comparison with the wide circulation of the *Saturday Evening Post*, a pro-Fascist magazine that largely contributed to Mussolini's fame in the United States. What united most of the 'pro-Fascist' responses was a fascination with Fascist modernity and in particular with the economic success of Fascist syndicalism.<sup>4</sup> This attitude would last until the late 1920s, when Marcus Duffield exposed the Fascist League of North America (Lega Fascista del Nord America) in his damning proclamation of 'Mussolini's American Empire' in *Harper's Magazine* from November 1929, which compelled American journalists to distance themselves from Fascism's totalitarian tendencies, and animated the Duce to dismantle the League because he feared it would jeopardise Italy's access to the vital American loans (mostly provided by J. P. Morgan) it sorely needed.<sup>5</sup> In the following years, America's cautious curiosity eventually evaporated as a result of the growing alignment between Italian Fascism and German National Socialism and, finally, the Duce's imperial venture in the Ethiopian War of 1935.<sup>6</sup>

Mussolini's Fascist performance of masculine statesmanship enhanced the transatlantic appeal of Italian Fascism in the 1920s, when even such 'highbrow' periodicals as the *Atlantic* manifested a prudent fascination with Italian Fascism, corporate syndicalism and the cult of the Duce. By the early twentieth century, *The Atlantic Monthly* had cemented its national standing as a flagbearer of intellectual rigour, progressive liberalism and bourgeois respectability. In a media landscape in which mass media, finance capital and the state had converged, I will examine the *Atlantic*'s coverage of Mussolini, Roosevelt and Wilson in order to suggest that the 'strong leadership' of the Duce already had a 'modern' precedent in the figure of Roosevelt, whose archetypal masculinity made the ageing, liberal Wilson appear as increasingly 'weak', thereby engendering the idiosyncratic appeal of the Duce across the Atlantic.

### Modern statesmanship: the 'newness' of Roosevelt, Wilson and Mussolini

If Theodore Roosevelt Jr (1858–1919) and Thomas Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) reached adulthood in the wake of the American Civil War (1861–1865), Benito Amilcare Andrea Mussolini (1883–1945) became a public persona in the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> This temporal asymmetry accounts, to some extent, for the variations in their masculinity and, consequently, their performances of statesmanship. What these three men had in common, however, is that they were unmistakably modern leaders. In the Progressive Era (1896–1916), the US President's executive powers expanded significantly; Roosevelt broadened the central government's jurisdiction in order to implement his Progressive reforms, and Wilson sustained this venture to rally

Americans behind 'the war effort'. Roosevelt and Wilson also broke decorum by leaving the continental United States while in office, with the former traveling to Latin America to oversee the imperial construction of the Panama Canal and the latter traveling to Europe to participate in the Paris Peace Conference. In the process, both men elevated the office of the US President from a mostly domestic affair to its newfound imperial standing as a 'world leader'.<sup>8</sup> These transformations in American statesmanship expressed themselves in the key reform movement of the early 1900s: American Progressivism. Roosevelt and Wilson were the chief advocates of this 'urban reaction to the excesses of unrestrained laissez-faire capitalism, rapid urbanisation and industrialisation'.<sup>9</sup>

In the Progressive Era, their use of mass media marked Roosevelt and Wilson as particularly modern. Roosevelt entered the White House as 'the first modern celebrity president' by cultivating his reputation as an author, cattle rancher, politician and military hero in the Spanish-American War (1898). In Roosevelt, Leo Braudy contends, 'the individual American might glimpse an image of himself or at least of someone whom the expanding world of newspapers, magazines, photography, films, and radio made seem as emotionally close as a friend or a member of the family'.<sup>10</sup> Although he initially rebuffed the mediatisation of political life, Wilson gradually embraced modern mass media as well. In 1913, he reinstated the State of the Union as a key channel for presidential interpellation by addressing Congress in person, and introduced the weekly presidential press conference as a core feature of his administration's public relations strategy.<sup>11</sup> Both men were, in other words, early practitioners of the 'media event' who used these staged spectacles to 'integrate societies in a collective heartbeat and evoke a renewal of loyalty to the society and its legitimate authority'.<sup>12</sup>

Across the Atlantic, Mussolini refined this vision of modern statesmanship for the Jazz Age. As Emilio Gentile has shown, the 'image of the United States' had begun to shape Fascist ideology and representation by the early 1920s, fashioning in particular its ambivalent disposition toward modernity.<sup>13</sup> Politically, Fascist anti-Americanism construed the United States as anti-European in its imperial aspirations and lofty internationalism, while culturally, it expressed a moral panic over the 'American way of life'. On the other hand, Italian Fascism also answered to a more positive stereotype of 'Americanness', perceiving the United States as a 'dawning civilisation' and as a 'good modernity' with whom it shared the virtues of dynamism, pragmatism, professional excellence, renewal and realisation, youth and vitality, national pride and imperial prowess. Like American Progressivism, Italian Fascism has often been understood as a response to the perceived dread of *fin-de-siècle* modernity on the one hand, and the spectre of socialist reform on the other – or as a synergy of both. In the first view, Italian Fascism surmounted the perceived stagnation, disorder, nihilism and anomie of the liberal democratic order at the turn of the century. In the second view, it embodied an anti-materialist alternative to both Marxism and Liberalism, a 'third way' known as 'Fascist Syndicalism' that recalibrated the relationship between individual and society while sustaining an emphasis on economic activity.<sup>14</sup>

Warfare similarly forged discourses of Fascist leadership in Italy. The Great War framed Mussolini's own transformation from Socialist strongman into Fascist archetype, bringing the Duce and the nationalists together while pairing them with an adolescent middle class of soon-to-be intellectuals who had also served on the front:

the evolution of Gabriele D'Annunzio from poet, novelist, playwright and journalist to one of the foremost ideological, political and military leaders of the Fascist Movement reflected this wartime transition. Moreover, Italy's mobilisation for 'total war' after 1915 allowed the state to intervene at unprecedented levels in national life by marshalling economic and human resources and by curtailing civil liberties while suspending the accountability of the executive branches of government to parliament – all of which set a template for the totalitarian Fascist state of the 1920s. In many ways, then, the Great War fashioned an imaginary of Italian nationhood which even eclipsed romantic evocations of the *Risorgimento*.<sup>15</sup> In this *zeitgeist*, Fascist intellectuals championed the discursive alliance between Fascist and liberal democratic statesmanship, suggesting that the US presidency had 'reached the semi-dictatorial forms of Theodore Roosevelt, of Wilson' because 'there is no other modern constitution which grants so much power to the executive'.<sup>16</sup>

Mussolini's statesmanship emerged out of this peculiar juncture in which Italian modernity, socialism, industrialised warfare and nation-building met a germinating Fascist consciousness. Akin to Roosevelt and Wilson, Mussolini's 'newness' expressed itself patently in his shrewd exploitation of the affordances of modern mass media. As in the United States, their mobilisation in support of the Italian war effort radically recalibrated the relationship between politics, media and the public sphere. By the 1920s, the political culture of the Fascist *ventennio* was increasingly indistinguishable from the commercial everyday. 'A regime that aimed to shape and condition clothing, leisure and domestic life', Stephen Gundle elucidates, 'inevitably entered the very realms in which consumer culture and modern communication were active'.<sup>17</sup> Newspapers, magazines, periodicals, books and radio broadcasts contributed to Mussolini's stardom at home and abroad. Above all, the cult of the Duce was a visual one, fetishising Mussolini's image in architecture, sculpture and painting while also duplicating his likeness on postcards, posters, photographs, moving images and even soap bars. The 'newness' of Mussolini resided, according to Alessandra Antola Swan, in 'a startling new awareness of corporeal expression where the Duce's face and body functioned together, as a powerful instrument of communication'.<sup>18</sup> The palpable aura of the leader's body stood in a marked continuum with contemporary acting techniques in both theatre and silent cinema, which Mussolini comfortably channelled in newsreels, documentaries and films in order to mediate the renewal of the Fascist nation and of the new Italian man.<sup>19</sup>

While the coupling of gender and nationhood in the figure of the male leader also fashioned the presidencies of Roosevelt and Wilson, these three statesmen differed in their masculine interpretation of modern leadership, and these differences were themselves part and parcel of the evolution of the mediated spectacle of transatlantic politics from the Gilded Age to the Jazz Age. The turn-of-the-century manhood of Roosevelt had its roots in a Victorian morality that cultivated a 'muscular Christianity' and Presbyterian disposition that galvanised both his Progressive reforms and his masculinist performance of the 'strenuous life'.<sup>20</sup> This set him apart from Wilson, the former professor of jurisprudence and political economy, who epitomised the bourgeois establishment and its yearning for a liberal world order in the shape of the League of Nations. Mussolini brought these two interpretations of modern leadership into the 1920s, but the public display of his Fordist torso – henceforth a signifier of Fascist



**Figure 1:** Colonel Theodore Roosevelt of the ‘Rough Riders’, after his return from Cuba (Stereograph, c. 1898). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)] (Copyright: Strohmeier & Wyman, Publisher, and Underwood & Underwood. *Col. Theodore Roosevelt of the ‘Rough Riders’ - after his return from Cuba*, c. 1898. New York, NY: Strohmeier & Wyman, publishers. November 14. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2010646527/>.)

virility – distinguished the Duce from both Roosevelt and Wilson. Fervently flaunting his anatomy in front of the camera while introducing a distinct culture of male nudity and fitness to the body of the leader, Mussolini’s exhibitionism would have been unfathomable even in the mass-mediated spectacle of American politics – and made him an appealing figure to Italian and American audiences alike.

### Roosevelt versus Wilson: presidential type versus countertype

At first, the American press portrayed the adolescent Roosevelt as ‘effeminate’, drawing attention to what was widely perceived as his ‘high-pitched voice’ and rather ‘extravagant appearance’. Roosevelt soon picked up on this gendered mockery and realised early on that such a ‘feminine image’ would jeopardise his future in politics. In the early 1880s, he accordingly embarked on a process of self-transformation that established the ‘new Roosevelt’ as a powerful symbol of American manhood. According to Gail Bederman, ‘Roosevelt’s success in masculinising his image was due, in large part, to his masterful use of the discourse of civilisation’, which allowed him to construct his persona as a defender of American national and imperial interests.<sup>21</sup> To this end, Roosevelt embraced a discourse of eugenics, presenting himself as a ‘typically American male’ who asserted his imperial control over what he regarded as ‘inferior races and peoples’. Like a frontiersman, Roosevelt personified courage, resourcefulness and self-reliance, as manifested in the militarist and imperialist performance of his manliness (Figure 1).<sup>22</sup> In Roosevelt’s view, Bederman explains, ‘America’s nationhood itself was the product of both racial superiority and virile manhood’, while an ‘unmanly, anti-imperialist race was as despicable as an unmanly, anti-imperialist

man'.<sup>23</sup> In other words, Roosevelt's hegemonic masculinity symbolised the supremacy of American civilisation.

Modern masculinity, George Mosse has shown, had conditioned such normative patterns of morality and behaviour since the late eighteenth century, celebrating a unity of body and soul as it linked a man's outward appearance to his inner virtues while equating his physical beauty with moral rectitude. By subsuming the masculine self into types of idealised manliness, modern masculinity attributed to each man the virtues of the group to which he was said to belong. First, the North Atlantic man stood for chivalry as he endorsed such values as loyalty, righteousness, prowess, sobriety and perseverance, which bestowed upon him a moral purpose marked by a sense of justice, equality and good order. Chivalry and honour were, second, reflected in the physical prowess of the muscular male body that signified virility, strength and courage, which, in turn, enabled a standard of male beauty to represent the wellbeing of the nation. This nationalisation of the male body was accompanied by its militarisation, which, third, imbued the ideal man with a sense of purpose as it promoted nationalist discourses of heroism, death and sacrifice. Fourth, Christian morality augmented man's moral standing and defined the 'ideal man' in terms of his sexual and mental purity, as demonstrated by his willpower, moderation and restraint. Ultimately, these four features merged into a fifth and primary symbol of hegemonic masculinity: the hero.<sup>24</sup>

In this moral and corporeal framework, Roosevelt performed his masculine prowess as a sign of progress toward a more perfect American civilisation. In September 1915, William Jewett Tucker claimed in 'The Progress of the Social Conscience' in *The Atlantic Monthly* that Roosevelt 'is not wanting in great moral qualities' because he 'is incorruptibly honest, quite immune to the temptations of money. He has a true understanding of the elemental virtues. He has ideals, held fast to practical uses through a saving common sense'. What mattered equally, as Tucker was quick to note, was that Roosevelt 'has moral as well as physical courage. He can fling himself with contagious abandon into a political fight. The versatility of his personal power is remarkable. He can do almost anything with himself except subordinate himself'.<sup>25</sup> Roosevelt's rectitude thus acquired a sense of 'ruggedness', which, taken together, set a template for a modern performance of presidential masculinity that articulated physical force and control, occupational achievement, familial patriarchy, frontiersmanship and heterosexuality in the image of the American nation.<sup>26</sup>

Above all, Roosevelt deftly exploited his public persona as the 'frontiersman-turned-president', itself centred on an idea of the 'strenuous life' that had to be endured in the wild landscapes of the American West.<sup>27</sup> When, in May 1906, the American naturalist John Burroughs published his memoir on 'Camping with President Roosevelt' in the *Atlantic*, he remarked that Roosevelt 'is a good deal of a storm – a man of such abounding energy and ceaseless activity that he sets everything in motion around him wherever he goes'. Knowingly associating Roosevelt with the frontiersman, Burroughs argued that the president was inclined 'to live only in the memory of those wonderful ranch days – that free, hardy, adventurous life upon the plains. (...) It had built him up and hardened him physically, and it had opened his eyes to the wealth of manly character among the plainsmen and cattlemen'. In this cinematic iconography of the Wild West, 'cowboys had always treated him with the utmost courtesy'

because ‘Roosevelt was a man made for action in a wide field’, uniting ‘in himself powers and qualities that rarely go together’ in that ‘he has both physical and moral courage in a degree rare in history. He can stand calm and unflinching in the path of a charging grizzly, and he can confront with equal coolness and determination the predaceous corporations and money powers of the country’. Roosevelt, Burroughs deduced in a sexually charged epiphany, ‘is doubtless the most vital man on the continent, if not on the planet, to-day. He is many sides, and every side throbs with his tremendous life and energy; the pressure is equal all around’.<sup>28</sup>

Politically, Roosevelt transmitted such virility by presenting himself as a champion of Progressive reform. ‘Everything in his physiognomy, his manner, his speech, his gestures’, Francis E. Leupp noted in June 1912, ‘bears witness to the energy stored up in him, for which must be made some outlet or other. This will explain why he is always doing something out of the common’.<sup>29</sup> The president expressed a strong belief in two discourses of ‘success’: one in which talent secured achievement, and one in which success was acquired through the diligence and perseverance of those who sufficiently desired it. Roosevelt defined his own success as the latter, famously identifying it as ‘the strenuous life’ in an 1899 speech in which he called on the United States to seize control of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines.<sup>30</sup> Through training and discipline, Roosevelt wrote in *The Strenuous Life* (1901), the American citizenry could construct ‘a race of strong, virile character’.<sup>31</sup> According to Leupp, such virility disclosed itself chiefly in the President’s ‘happy gift of phrase-making’. “‘The strenuous life”, “the square deal”, “the larger good”, “molly-coddles and weaklings”, “the predatory rich”, “undesirable citizens”, “civic righteousness”, “deliberate and infamous mendacity”, and “beaten to a frazzle””, Leupp remarked, interpellated an ideal of American manliness that nourished ‘authority, control, independence, competitive individualism, aggressiveness, and the capacity for violence’.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, the modern president required a countertype to construct his hegemonic manhood as an ideal for all men to aspire to.<sup>33</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, the president’s ‘public exhibition of manly prowess heightened the other men’s awareness of their own masculine shortcomings and encouraged them to strive for a male maturity. His manly language and masterful deeds provided criteria by which most men could measure, judge, and rate one another’.<sup>34</sup> The presidential campaign of 1840 thus celebrated William Henry Harrison (1773–1841) of the Whig Party as the ‘self-made man of the people’ while ‘feminising’ his Democratic opponent, Martin van Buren (1782–1862), as an aristocrat of European taste and effete manliness. Henceforth, a discourse of masculine statesmanship would frame the president’s manhood, ‘his manly resolve, firmness, courage and power equated with the capacity of violence, military virtues, and a plain-living style that avoided refinement and civility’.<sup>35</sup> By the 1890s, moreover, a ‘discourse of civilisation’ began to fuse gender normativity with racial difference in order to distinguish the type from its countertype. ‘Class-based challenges to the power of middle-class manhood seemed to disappear’, according to Bederman, ‘behind civilisation’s promise that the hard-working, meritorious, virile Anglo-Saxon man was inexorably moving toward racial dominance and the highest evolutionary advancement’.<sup>36</sup> If modern masculinity required a negative countertype that either assimilated or defined its manhood in opposition to the hegemonic ideal, the president’s masculinity operated dialectically in a contrasting of pairs:



a publicly recognised countertype to hegemonic masculinity served to underscore the manliness of the president.<sup>37</sup>

Wilson came to personify this countertype in the final years of his presidency. In a vein similar to the adolescent Roosevelt, Wilson embarked, as Josh Glick has demonstrated, on a process of self-transformation during his 1912 presidential campaign in order to ‘man-up’ his image, which he perceived as rather subdued and scholarly in comparison with Roosevelt’s more muscular Christianity: ‘[Roosevelt] appeals to their imagination. I do not. He is a real, vivid person who they have seen and shouted themselves hoarse for and voted for, millions strong. I am a vague, conjectural personality, more made up of opinions and academic prepossessions than of human traits and red corpuscles’.<sup>38</sup> If Roosevelt eagerly performed his charismatic manhood in such early nonfiction genres as the political reportage, the travel diary and the historical re-enactment, Wilson was initially weary of the camera and the microphone and preferred instead a live audience who could bear witness to his refined speechwriting and assured oratory skills.<sup>39</sup> The 1912 presidential race alleviated his scepticism because it ‘sensitised Wilson to the captivating new medium [of film] and in the years that followed, the president and his administration would become increasingly interested in film’s place within public life’.<sup>40</sup> The First World War expedited Wilson’s faith in the affordances of mass communication because they enabled him to remake his manly image into a model of moral and military resolve, convincing the American public of the need for a US intervention in the Great War and of Wilson’s ability to lead the war effort. By the time the Allied Powers and Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles, Giorgio Bertellini concludes, Wilson’s ‘media ubiquity had allowed him to reap the remarkable political benefits of a strengthened executive office’.<sup>41</sup>

The apex of Wilson’s global leadership at the Paris Peace Conference ultimately precipitated his demise in the final years of his presidency, when his statesmanship suffered two setbacks. First, Wilson’s failure to convince the US Senate to join the League of Nations tarnished his authority worldwide. Since Roosevelt, the role of the president had been associated with his singular responsibility as commander-in-chief in a distinctly gendered transition from civilian leadership to militarist authority.<sup>42</sup> In the twentieth century, multilateralism had become gendered as ‘feminine’ in that it stressed cooperation over competition, with unilateralism articulating a more ‘masculine’ response. The ‘resolute president’ came to be seen a ‘man of action’, while the intellectual weight of the ‘equivocating president’ usually carried connotations of ‘effeminacy’. And when the president expressed empathy or compassion, he positioned himself as ‘feminine’ and thereby jeopardised his credibility as commander-in-chief.<sup>43</sup> Wilson’s failure at Versailles, then, signified the gradual erosion of his multilateral, equivocating and compassionate liberal world order of international collaboration and national self-determination.<sup>44</sup> The ‘tragedy’ [*sic*] of the final Wilson years, Charles William Eliot observed in the *Atlantic* upon his death in 1924, was that there was ‘no use for idealism in politics and government’ at Versailles and Paris while ‘President Wilson had no use for anything else in that field’.<sup>45</sup>

After his failure to shepherd the Treaty of Versailles through the US Senate, Eliot noted, ‘Wilson undertook a final appeal to the American people in a long series of public addresses, but was stopped half way by a serious breakdown of strength and vitality [and] a heavy stroke incapacitated him for further public service’.<sup>46</sup> According



**Figure 2:** Woodrow Wilson (Glass negatives, c. 1923)

(Copyright: *Woodrow Wilson*, 1923. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016836451/>.)

to Rose McDermott, Wilson's physical hardship indeed beget a second setback to his presidential masculinity. After he suffered a major stroke in October 1919, Wilson became physically impaired and struggled with his executive responsibilities. During the final months of his presidency, he was no longer able to move his limbs and expressed a growing disinterest in his professional duties. At a time when the aftermath of the First World War required the US president to lead on a myriad of domestic and international concerns, Wilson was increasingly seen as incapable of providing the government with a clear sense of direction. 'Wilson's story', McDermott posits,

contains tragic elements because his absence from power led not only to the defeat of the League of Nations. The loss of his previously high level of effective engagement in government at all levels also deprived the country of any number of positive outcomes in various areas that undoubtedly would have occurred had Wilson been in full possession of his faculties. (Figure 2)<sup>47</sup>

By the 1920s, public opinion began to associate Wilson's physical ailment with his psychological instability. 'Broken nerves', Mosse reminds us, were often said to hint at the neurotic's lack of manhood.<sup>48</sup> At the time, Wilson's physical hardship engendered a fierce debate between William Bullitt and Sigmund Freud, who saw in the president 'a neurotic man' driven by unconscious and inconsistent desires, while in

1964, Alexander George and Juliette George hypothesised that the trauma of Wilson's authoritarian upbringing had shaped his emotional instability, stubbornness and low self-esteem – which in turn facilitated a behavioural pattern that came to define Wilson's political life.<sup>49</sup> When 'his self-esteem was pricked or his authority was called into question', McDermott elaborates, 'Wilson became predictably belligerent and intransigent, even to the point of risking the substance of an issue, to prove his power and authority, which for him often took the form of moral imperative and approbation'.<sup>50</sup> If the virile Rooseveltian statesman symbolised a dynamic society, the 'psychologically instable' Wilsonian countertype came to be seen as increasingly incapable of nurturing a healthy community through strong leadership.<sup>51</sup>

In January 1920, newspaper publisher Charles H. Gasty gave voice to these concerns in 'The Personality Behind the President' in the *Atlantic*, lauding Wilson's intellect and his proclivity for getting things done but also criticising his notorious intransigence, remarking that the thing that 'prevents the President from realising on the big things that he does well because of the little things he does ill is the predominance in him of the intellectual quality'. Noting that Wilson 'lacks a certain sort of animal heat', Gasty zoomed in on Roosevelt's motion to co-lead an American intervention in the Great War by reinstalling his 'Rough Riders' division from the Spanish-American War. While 'I understand the difference in temperament between the two men', Gasty observed, Wilson should have accepted Roosevelt's proposition because it 'would have had an electrical effect inspiring and unifying the country behind Wilson and the war. Roosevelt would have played the game squarely. He was a colt in the pasture, but a wheel-horse in harness'. Gasty attributed this failure to Wilson's ego, suggesting that the president put the potential value of Roosevelt's aura 'through a coldly intellectual process of assessment'.<sup>52</sup>

This caution toward liberal intellect had become a distinct feature of American life by the late nineteenth century.<sup>53</sup> Politicians who claimed to be 'noble' and 'unselfish' were often thought of as both detached from and unfit for the realities of everyday life. This was no less true for Wilson, whose intellect was consistently construed as 'soft' and 'effeminate'.<sup>54</sup> When, in February 1931, Gamaliel Bradford pondered Wilson's legacy in 'Brains Win and Lose: Woodrow Wilson' in the *Atlantic*, he accordingly concluded that

the intellect was the driving, the controlling force, and the defects of brains are as obvious in him as the excellences. For brains can do the greatest things in the world – they can develop ideals, they can build up states and civilisations – but they can also mislead and ruin and shatter an individual who puts a too blind trust in them.

According to Bradford, the limitations of Wilson's intellect expressed themselves above all in the failure of the League of Nations. 'In a passionate effort to persuade the American people to reverse the Senate's verdict, Wilson shattered his health completely, and the last year of his Presidency was passed under a tragic cloud of physical feebleness and political failure'.<sup>55</sup>

In contrast, Roosevelt cultivated a 'high-bred manliness' that combined discipline, heartiness and 'freedom from the tendency to abnormal precocious vice'.<sup>56</sup> In *The Strenuous Life*, he merged this understanding of masculine virtuousness with a toxic and violent conceptualisation of American manhood. 'A peaceful and commercial civilisation', Roosevelt maintained, 'is always in danger of suffering the loss of the

virile fighting qualities without which no nation, however cultured, however refined, however thrifty and prosperous, can ever amount to anything'.<sup>57</sup> Roosevelt's masculinity sought to curb what many Anglo-American intellectuals around the turn of the century understood as the dangers of effeminacy, over-civilisation and racial decadence, which 'let Roosevelt construct American imperialism as a conservative way to retain the race's frontier-forged manhood, instead of what it really was – a belligerent grab for a radically new type of nationalistic power'.<sup>58</sup> In 1897, Henry Merwin thus labelled the 'respectable American man' [*sic*] as 'a creature who is what we call oversophisticated and effete – a being in whom the springs of action are, in a greater or lesser degree, paralysed or perverted by the undue prominence of the intellect'.<sup>59</sup> In 1886, Roosevelt had expressed a similar bias when he observed that there was a 'general tendency among people of culture and education ... to neglect and even look down on the rougher and manlier virtues, so that an advanced state of intellectual development is too often associated with a certain effeminacy of character'.<sup>60</sup>

When Wilson assumed office, then, a discrepancy arose between these 'rugged' and 'liberal-bourgeois' performances of North Atlantic statesmanship, which facilitated the initially benign view of Mussolini's Fascist leadership in the United States in the 1920s. During this decade, *The Atlantic Monthly* often betrayed an ambivalent stance in which Italian Fascism was construed as either a form of tyranny or as a successful alternative to what was increasingly seen as the sluggish praxis of American liberal democracy.<sup>61</sup> The periodical's contributors were repeatedly enthralled by the Duce's transformation of Italy into a 'corporate state' that had brought about a spirit of economic vitality, which stood in marked contrast to the perceived post-war malaise in the United States. Fascism, they maintained, offered a more pragmatic route to national regeneration. James Murphy expressed these attitudes in 'Fascismo: Reform and Reaction, The Development of Italian Syndicalism' from January 1924, claiming that Fascist syndicalism had been desirable because 'by a process of natural selection in the activities of the syndicates and corporations an industrial elite will rise to the surface and keep renewing its worn-out elements by a steady upwards exodus from the lower strata', which, implied that 'the professional politician may ultimately be eliminated'.<sup>62</sup>

### Fascist masculinity and the transatlantic appeal of Mussolini

It was in Italian Fascism that modern masculinity reached its apogee, transforming manliness into 'a principle that transcended daily life'.<sup>63</sup> As evidenced by his ambition and energy, the 'new Fascist man' served Italian nationalism in its quest for the realisation of a new society. This Fascist masculinity, which had its origins in Italian Futurism, stressed service to the greater good to strengthen the political and ideological fabric of the Fascist Movement. The new Italian man had to be disciplined, self-controlled, ready to take up arms and even sacrifice his life for the renewal of Italy. Forged by the trauma of the First World War, such a militarist interpretation of modern manhood positioned the lived experience of combat at the heart of its hegemonic masculinity. Wartime camaraderie became a tenet of Mussolini's new society, while a cult of death and sacrifice symbolised the destruction of the bourgeois order as well as the dawning of a new, Fascist state. As elsewhere, the Italian Fascists equated physical prowess with male purity. Uniforms, marches and physical exercise stressed

the beauty of a masculine body that, in turn, signified man's noble soul. Protecting the nation from internal denigration, a healthy body symbolised a manly spirit, while physical exercise encouraged the cultivation of man's inner self as it instilled discipline, rectitude and grit in the new Fascist man. 'The extreme of Fascist manliness mattered', according to Mosse, because the 'emphasis on action was supposed to distinguish the new man from the bourgeois, associated in the Fascist mind with passivity, cynicism, and decadence. In contrast, the Fascist man ... unites culture, knowledge, and action'.<sup>64</sup>

In the *Atlantic* from February 1923, L. J. S. Wood expressed this perspective in 'Ho, Lictors, Clear the Way!: Fascismo and the Fascisti'. Wood shared the view of Mussolini as a 'Doctor-Dictator' at the helm of the Fascist Movement, which he understood as a new generation of young and energetic Italians and as an organisation that, once it had 'shed its excesses', would 'revert to its excellent origins' in order to return Italy to greatness. He subsequently defined Fascism as at once a military organisation, ideological movement and political union that 'arose to fight [the] extreme Socialism [and the] threatening Communism', identifying Mussolini as the charismatic statesman that Italy had long been waiting for, the great enabler of national regeneration at the head of revolutionary struggle against the *Biennio Rosso*. The problem with Italy, Wood maintained, was that it 'has many good men, but no one great man': 'Signor Mussolini' filled this vacuum.<sup>65</sup> In a similar vein, H. H. Powers observed in 'The Receding Tide of Democracy' from April 1924 that the 'fact that change has been made without violence and that the machinery of popular government has been preserved and to some extent utilised has somewhat obscured the fundamental character of the change'. Praising these reforms, Powers attributed their success to the masculinist cult of the Duce while lauding the Fascists for their discipline and 'spirit of moral exaltation which must not be forgotten in our estimate of Mussolini'. The Duce, he believed, signified the restless energy of youth. 'It is not that he has clearer vision or more public spirit than older men', he stressed, 'but that he longs for something to do'. He thus condoned Mussolini's *coup d'état* because of 'his disgust with the Italian Government as he knew it', and vindicated the Fascist revolution as 'profoundly significant' and reflecting 'very remarkable qualities on the part of Mussolini'.<sup>66</sup>

If American news outlets expressed a mounting concern over the anti-democratic seizure of the Italian peninsula, some factions nonetheless persevered in their support of Fascist modernity. In 'A Scrambling and Unquiet Time' from January 1926, Henry W. Bunn argued that 'Mussolini's Dictatorship has been beneficent', because Mussolini 'has balanced the budget, improved trade, greatly reduced unemployment, immensely enhanced efficiency in all the services, and raised the international prestige of his country'.<sup>67</sup> Two months later, Agnes Repplier went as far as to equate American liberal democracy with Italian Fascism in 'What is Moral Support? America's Gratitude to Europe'. Italians, she ruminated, were as civilised as Americans; therefore, 'Rome and Washington should respect each other, and be as morally helpful to each other as they know how to be'.<sup>68</sup> These qualities, the candidly pro-Fascist Robert Sencourt concurred in April 1925 in 'Population and the Future', were evinced above all in the Duce's virility, which had transformed Italy into 'the America of European nations'. Echoing the Fascist cult of *romanità*, Sencourt proclaimed that Italy was even younger and indeed more virile than the United States while 'hardly less eager, for

her new unity is the inheritor of ancient achievement: she is young with the youth of eternity'. Italy, he concluded, was not only one of Europe's most prosperous nations but also supplied an energetic workforce to the United States, thereby contributing to the revitalisation of this transatlantic economy.<sup>69</sup>

Mussolini, *The Atlantic's* contributors repeatedly acceded, personified these Fascist qualities of manliness, youth and virility. 'A man of the people, and therefore able to understand the people's demands', Gigliola Gori suggests, 'the Duce created a myth of himself by adapting the image of the Nietzschean "superman" to Italian mentalities'.<sup>70</sup> Mussolini performed his manhood pointedly, relying on theatrical gestures, public oration and a consistent emphasis on his virile body in order to present himself as the archetype of the new Fascist man. 'The cult of youth, of duty, and of physical strength and sexual potency that characterise Fascism', Barbara Spackman claims, were 'all inflections of that master term, "virility"'.<sup>71</sup> In an aptly titled eulogy on 'The New Romulus and the New Rome' in the *Atlantic* from July 1928, the British military officer and historian B. H. Liddell Hart located such virility in the fitness of the Fascist male body, arguing that 'the physical development and moral education' of 'the nation's youth' are 'marked not so much by the erection of stadia, where throngs of spectators can watch the gladiatorial fray of the football field, as by the sight of fields and hillsides dotted with gymnastic appliances'. The ensuing liturgy of fitness 'is producing a race of men agile as cats and of superlative physique and endurance', which, in turn, privileges 'the young, and their inculcation with the practical virtues of discipline, integrity, honest work, and subordination of self to the national interest'. In such a strenuous performance of manhood, 'the habits of hard work, discipline, and honesty can be implanted widespread' in one generation, thereby providing 'a good foundation for the next, its roots embedded in freshly fertilised soil, to yield a harvest both more plentiful and of finer quality than in the past'. When the Duce accordingly entrusted Giovanni Gentile with reforming Italy's educational system, the latter discouraged 'the production of half-educated babus, fit only for office stools, while giving better scope than ever to the youths of more than average aptitude'.<sup>72</sup>

The association of male virility with Fascist masculinity was not set in stone. Indeed, early twentieth-century Italian manhood often negated and occasionally subverted the 'new man' of Italian Fascism. As John Champagne has demonstrated, the Taylorist and Fordist economy of 1920s Italy might have moulded these beefcakes into symbols of youth and virility but simultaneously subjected their square, muscled torsos to a desiring gaze which could be construed as both feminine and homoerotic. In the new age of commodity culture, this meant that 'gender differentiation could no longer occur primarily at the level of production, as it had in the past, as production no longer demanded the physical labor that justified differentiating between surplus-producing male labor and subsistence female labor'.<sup>73</sup> Aesthetic modernism became the idiom through which Fascist ideology sought to contain this unbridled consumption of the fit male physique in order to nullify its erotisation and feminisation.<sup>74</sup> Above all, it was D'Annunzio who evinced both a clear concern for the male body and a shrewd awareness of contemporary anxieties about its disintegration in *fin-de-siècle* Italy. If the virility of the new Italian man expressed a Fascist desire for a modern and forward-looking nation, D'Annunzio's fondness for theatricality and display simultaneously

construed his body as a site of social differentiation and identity formation, with the volatility of his body connoting the violability of Italian national identity.<sup>75</sup>

It mattered that Mussolini was not D'Annunzio. Unlike the new man of Fascist ideology and representation, D'Annunzio's modernism did 'not conceive of masculinity as a closed project. Its very openness is a threat, and also a lure, to both psychic and corporeal integrity'.<sup>76</sup> The Duce, in contrast, worked actively to disavow such corporeal ambivalence. By discursively repositioning his body in relation to modern technologies (sport cars), labour (harvesting), military prowess (aviation) or sports and exercise (skiing), Mussolini sought to reconstruct the integrity of the Fascist male body as a site of productive relations (Figure 3).<sup>77</sup> The Duce consistently practiced sports in public, flaunting his muscles while presenting himself, often bare-chested, to both his domestic constituency and the international press and Italian diaspora in the United States. His public performance of such everyday activities enhanced his transatlantic appeal, for it strengthened his image as both a virile man and a man of the people. In doing so, Bertellini argues, 'Mussolini sought to contrast the stigmatising characteristics usually attributed to Italians – such as disorganisation, ineptitude, and sentimentalism – with the image of a new Italian man who was efficient, pragmatic, and, most importantly, disciplined'.<sup>78</sup>

In the *Atlantic* from November 1929, the French essayist Maurice Bedel's take on how 'A Frenchman Looks at Fascism' knowingly linked the cult of the Duce to such a Fascist proclivity for youth and virility, celebrating the Duce as 'a prince of youth, ... who is stern in his demands but finds them more than fulfilled. It is on youth that he depends, and to youth he gives his favors'. Indeed, Italy's virility was to be found 'among the young people', whose 'words often border on a sort of mystic worship' of Mussolini. According to Bedel, the Duce's manhood expressed itself chiefly in his Futurist penchant for machines, speed, sports and outdoor activities, in that Mussolini 'is known to have only his horse, his violin, or his rapid motor which he rides across country on the fine straight roads which he is so proud to have provided for his people'. Such public performances of everyday masculine prowess articulated his, 'forthright courage or his fine indifference to worldly goods ... Compounded of vigor and suppleness, able to master a horse or draw song from a violin, he can rouse a crowd to frenzy with his words or charm a visiting Frenchman with the gracefulness of his manners'.<sup>79</sup>

In this *zeitgeist*, the liaison between Italian Fascism and the nation's intelligentsia oscillated, as in the United States, between reproachment and rejection. The regime, Sandro Bellassai points out, promoted 'once again the ideal masculine model of the combatant devoted to action' as an alternative to 'the negative product of modernity: the reflexive, hypersensitive and frail man whose passive and uncertain character derived from an excess of rationality'.<sup>80</sup> At the same time, Mussolini was astutely aware of the need to incorporate Italy's intelligentsia into the cultural and intellectual project of Fascist modernity.<sup>81</sup> As Marla Stone has demonstrated, the Fascist regime pursued a 'hegemonic pluralism' that sought to co-opt rather than prohibit a wide array of aesthetic movements and expressions. In doing so, it could comfortably accommodate modernist and avant-garde aesthetics, emerging mass cultural techniques and nationalist cultural formations, each of which negotiated in their own way the core dilemmas at the heart of Fascist modernity, such as the tensions between pluralism and propaganda,



**Figure 3:** A shirtless Benito Mussolini skiing at Mount Terminillo, Italy (Negative, 20 January 1937).

(Copyright: Cinecittà – Istituto Luce Historical Archive. *Foto Attualità / Terminillo – Il Duce Sciatore. Mussolini a dorso nudo in piedi sulla neve del Terminillo, c. 1937.* Rome, Italy: Cinecittà – Istituto Luce Historical Archive. January 20. Photograph.)



modernism and tradition, and nationalism and regionalism.<sup>82</sup> What most Fascist ideologues abhorred, however, were the liberal-democratic intellectuals who had dominated the public sphere in Italy prior to the First World War. ‘The bourgeois spirit’, Jorge Dagnino suggests, ‘was depicted as passive and feminine while the Fascist was the active, history-maker and virile principle governing the modern world’.<sup>83</sup> In this Fascist imaginary, the bourgeois intellectual was a hedonistic man and a pacifist, who lacked the experience of combat and refrained from physical action and exercise because he was devoid of the courage and willpower to cultivate a military spirit, which in turn recalled his spiritual paucity. The new Italian man, in contrast, reasserted the manly values of action, impulsivity and youth in order to protect the nation from such an unmanly hazard.

The cult of the Duce established Mussolini as the archetype of such a virile manhood both at home and abroad. In the United States, Bertellini observes, ‘Mussolini matched the white American male’s notions of manliness (vigor, self-mastery, and self-restraint)’.<sup>84</sup> In their diplomatic communications, press briefings and newspaper editorials, American bankers, publicists, journalists, diplomats, ambassadors and media industry officials singled out the Duce’s ‘widespread attractiveness and recognition’, extolling the virile manhood that Mussolini eagerly performed in newsreels, documentaries and fiction films that framed him as the new Italian man – itself a signifier of Fascist modernity.<sup>85</sup> The ‘cinematic quality’ of the Duce was particularly pronounced in the camera’s lingering fascination with his distinct facial features. ‘When you study a personal close-up of this dominant, domineering, imperial, and imperious face’, Alice Rohe, an American journalist in Rome, proclaimed, ‘the spell which he exerts over women is not surprising’.<sup>86</sup> The many close-ups of his face enabled Mussolini to connect with his audiences across the Atlantic, where his appearance in newsreels such as the Fox Movietone sound film *Man of the Hour* (Movietone News, 1927) – the first recording that added the Duce’s voice to his widely circulated image – stressed ‘Mussolini’s close relationship with symbols of modernity and technological progress’ while permitting the reproduction of the Duce’s marble visage in the new moving image medium.<sup>87</sup>

Bedel mused on this seductive mediation, claiming that his *Atlantic* readers instantly recognised the Duce,

from the photographs – that face with its frowning brow, its fiery glance, its firm-set jaw with lips tight closed on a brief and irrevocable command. It is a mask that says, ‘We must be firm, we must be hard’. You run against it wherever you turn in Italy – in newspaper offices, tea rooms, barber shops, telephone booths, in the corner tobacco shop, and in the literary salon of Grazia Deledda. Its expression fairly haunts you.<sup>88</sup>

In like manner, Liddell Hart observed how no one could travel to Italy, without seeing the hand of ‘Il Duce’ throughout. His face also, incidentally – for on town house and small farmsteads, far off the beaten track, in the endless plains for Lombardy or the towering battlements of the Apennines, his features are to be seen stenciled on the walls.<sup>89</sup>

Mussolini, he argued, performed his virility in public, either exercising in his backyard or riding his horse under the watchful eye of the camera. ‘In appearance’, Liddell Hart noted, the Duce ‘was shorter than I had expected, broad but muscular, and dressed in a conventional morning coat, well turned out, but not too dapper. The eyes,

somewhat projecting, fulfill their reputation in expressiveness and penetration; a powerful jaw, yet a brow that dominates the jaw'. Singling out the audiovisual quality of the Duce, Liddell Hart described how he 'uses his head, and by its sharp and often unusual angles of inclination conveys great expressiveness. His voice, soft-toned but firm, is at the same time the most musical I have ever heard' – an observation that echoed the transatlantic broadcast of the Movietone newsreel *Man of the Hour* one year earlier.<sup>90</sup>

This orchestrated public relations campaign resonated strongly with 'the American way of life' during the Jazz Age.<sup>91</sup> The 1920s witnessed a growing interest in sports culture and physical activities in the United States, allowing American men to reassert their Fordist body at a time when hegemonic masculinity was said to be under threat from both post-war emasculation and the emancipation of female labour and sexuality. 'Exercise through sport and various forms of physical conditioning', Gaylyn Studlar claims, 'were believed to be crucial in transforming the boy into a well-developed man whose physical strength and kinetic energy confirmed both the individual's and the nation's manly character'.<sup>92</sup> American media outlets thus fetishised an often-sexualised Mussolini, focusing on his clean-shaved face, restrained gaze and theatrical presentation in order to celebrate his striking physical appearance and singular charisma. In the process, the Duce was moulded into a commodity for the American consumer culture of the 1920s, which capitalised on his personality cult while embracing his virile and militarist manhood.

Politically, the transatlantic cult of the Duce allowed the US press corps to project an American idea of modern statesmanship onto the Fascist leader, condoning 'Mussolini's violent oppression of the Left, his commitment to a corporate state, and his use of military nationalism, in part because his policies closely matched their own'.<sup>93</sup> Powers reminded his *Atlantic* readers in May 1924 that the international community did not reject the Duce's confrontational approach at first. The former American ambassador in Rome, Richard Washburn Child, was Mussolini's 'outspoken partisan in a measure approaching diplomatic indiscretion', while foreign diplomats judged him favourably 'by his administrative reforms rather than by the principle [of democracy] at stake'. Powers positioned Mussolini in direct opposition to Wilson, covering the Duce's confrontation with the League of Nations and interpreting Italy's temporary occupation of Corfu as 'a conflict between two fundamental attitudes toward the world order' while criticising the League for its 'static definition of nations' within that order. 'Mussolini', he declared, was 'perfectly right in his assertion that cases involving national honor cannot be submitted to alien jurisdiction or to reasoned settlement of any kind. Instinct must have its way'.<sup>94</sup> In a similar vein, Captain Liddell Hart assured his readers that Fascism's intimidating policies 'are often carried out with a quiet effectiveness and a surprising courtesy which lead him [the external observer] to make favorable comparisons with the methods of his own bureaucracy'. Compared to the apparatus of state in the liberal democracies of the North Atlantic, where 'bureaucracy is conscious of its security, conscious that it can only be brought to book by means and processes tardy and difficult in application, bureaucracy under Signor Mussolini holds power at the will of an individual chief, and is subject to a discipline more severe than that which it exercises'.<sup>95</sup> When, in January 1929, Silvio Trentin, an Italian liberal and outspoken anti-Fascist, dismissed the Wilsonian doctrine of national

self-determination, he cynically concluded that it amounted to ‘nothing more or less than a weapon in the hands of the conquerors, who are enabled to pursue their own ends under cover of a magic formula’.<sup>96</sup>

In sum, the initially congenial reception of Mussolini across the Atlantic implied a rehabilitation of his Fordist masculinity on the one hand and a repudiation of Wilsonian liberal internationalism on the other. Liddell Hart concluded that the non-democratic nature of Mussolini’s dictatorship helped, ‘in bringing it about that to them [the Italian people] as a whole the Duce has become almost more than man, demigod even. And their faith ... is fortified not only by their belief in his inspiration, but by the comforting knowledge that above the bureaucrats is the autocrat’.<sup>97</sup>

Indeed, according to John Diggins, the Duce was ‘the American answer to many other things that were “wrong” with the world’. ‘The failure of Wilsonianism and the demise of progressivism’, Diggins concludes, ‘led to a cold re-examination of the uneasy assumptions of liberal thought regarding the rationality and goodness of man, the certainty of moral values and political standards, and the inevitability of human progress and world democracy’.<sup>98</sup> When William Bennett Munro looked back on the first two years of President Warren G. Harding (1921–1923), he lamented Harding’s executive sluggishness in the *Atlantic*, observing how the American public had rarely been,

so badly bewildered. The issues have been ambiguous, confused, obscured. There has been no approach to a consensus on any subject ... The country has been in a mood of rection, skepticism, negation. It has been in a disillusioned, restive, diacritical frame of mind. Leadership of an authoritative and dominating sort has been sorely needed during the past two years to rouse the electorate to an attitude of positivism on public questions.<sup>99</sup>

Echoing the widely felt political malaise of the Jazz Age, Munro concluded that ‘the fundamental reason for so little display of America’s international leadership in 1923 is that there was so much of it in 1919. Mr. Wilson, misjudging the attitude of his own countrymen, went too far and too fast’.<sup>100</sup> In March 1932, Walter Millis arrived at a similar conclusion in his estimation of President Herbert Hoover (1929–1933), whose ascendancy made sense because the ‘currents of doubt and disillusion were just beginning to set across the ebbing tide of war-time altruism. The doubters saw Mr. Hoover as a less dangerous type of idealist than Mr. Wilson; the idealists saw him as a liberal less likely to get wrecked in the new whirlpools of doubt’.<sup>101</sup> Hoover’s ‘mediocrity’ [*sic*], in other words, meant that the United States came across as ‘divided and inconsistent, because the President is striving in one direction while his more nationalistic people continue in the other’, thus falling into the same trap as ‘President Wilson at Versailles’.

This American *zeitgeist* allowed the pro-Fascist Sencourt to persevere in his support for the Duce in May 1926, stressing that ‘while Mussolini is not faultless ... we cannot understand Fascism till we realise what it replaced’. Fascism, Sencourt maintained, had to be understood as a successful response to the failures of the Italian monarchy, the Catholic Church and Communism. In this context, Mussolini emerged as a visionary statesman who had rehabilitated Italy after an epoch of political disarray and socio-economic malaise, whose ‘genius shows itself in his power to adapt the large views and theories of others to Italy’s essential needs’. Endorsing the Duce’s corporate state, Sencourt concluded that Italian Fascism required liberal democratic

leaders to consider whether ‘the whole fabric of democracy, with all its theories, is not itself collapsing’.<sup>102</sup> In ‘Follow the Leader’ from August 1926, Ernst Jonson arrived at a similar verdict, claiming that,

in so-called democracies the dominant group, for the most part, absorbs men of mediocre capacity and of doubtful integrity. They do not bring into national service the highest-skilled talent of the people, but delegate their sovereignty to men who will serve the self-seeking interests of the group, and who can give expression to the confused and nebulous sentiments of the crowd.<sup>103</sup>

In such a political landscape, Jonson argued, the ‘concentration of power in the hands of one man’ could be felt as ‘a relief from the irresponsible tyranny of the mob. When the dominant group is formed by the more intelligent, more patriotic classes, when there are contained in it men of spiritual insight, whose thought has some measure of the quality of inspiration, then the people is really governed’.<sup>104</sup> The ‘one man’ in Jonson’s reverie was Mussolini, who ‘has given the people a strong and efficient government. Discipline has been reestablished in the public service by a system of rigid inspection’. In this phantasma of Fascist rule, it mattered little that the Duce was not a democrat because he stood ‘at the head of the manhood of Italy’, blazing ‘a trail by which all nations may find their way out of the entanglements of democracy when the evils thereof become too great to be endured’.

### Visions of statesmanship across the Atlantic

As modern masculinity travelled from Europe to the United States, it transformed the popular perception of statesmanship across the Atlantic. In the US, hegemonic manhood began to inform discourses on presidential masculinity from the mid-nineteenth century onward. Presidential candidates began to exploit a dual campaign strategy: discursive control, which allowed the candidate to regulate his manly image and its representation in the media; and a rhetorical display of masculinist themes, which enabled the candidate to present himself as a symbol of strength, willpower, virility and leadership.<sup>105</sup> This gendered shift allowed Roosevelt to fashion a presidential masculinity that fused frontier values, Victorian morality and virile manliness. At the same time, modern statesmanship established a countertype that construed presidential candidates as ‘effeminate’ if they failed to live up to this manly ideal, rendering them as ‘inept’ by associating ‘liberalism with softness’, positioning intellectual pursuit as ‘a lack of inner strength and determination’, reducing nuance in political debate to ‘a sign of waffling and a lack of an inner values-based compass’ and deriding compassion for the suffering of others as ‘weakness’.<sup>106</sup> Wilson’s presidential masculinity suffered from these perceived deficiencies of liberal bourgeois statesmanship.

As the modern US president began to situate his manhood in opposition to the ‘effeminate’ of the liberal world order, so did the Fascist man in Italy. Mussolini pointedly performed his Fascist masculinity to this end, manipulating the affordances of modern mass media to secure discursive control over his manly image while celebrating his masculine prowess, virility and willpower. The American disenchantment with Wilson’s liberal internationalism propelled the Doctor-Dictator into a Fascist surrogate for the masculine US president. For the intellectuals of *The Atlantic Monthly*, the ‘Italian Roosevelt’ stood for a pragmatic leader who had rehabilitated the Italian nation. For the American middle class, the Duce represented the triumph of traditional

values on the one hand and their enthusiasm for an alternative, Fascist modernity on the other. In a decade of political, economic and social turmoil, the American intelligentsia saw in Mussolini the personification of the masculine ideals of acumen, discipline and strength, a manly hero who rejected the bourgeois liberalism of the Wilson years. In the process, the Duce came to represent a transatlantic vision of statesmanship that offered his American devotees a Fascist symbol of hope and possibility in times of a growing discontent with the liberal democracies of the West. Indeed, American liberal democracy and Italian Fascism both regulated hegemonic masculinity across the Atlantic in order to cement an image of the nation in which the dictator was a doctor and the cowboy was a president. In doing so, American presidential masculinity and Italian Fascist leadership contributed to the further normative gendering of their historically bounded states. One century later, the tripartite of mass media, corporate finance and the state, which had precipitated these distinctly modern visions of leadership in the early 1900s, would engender the toxic statesmanship of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Donald J. Trump in the United States.

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