
60. For a similar argument with regard to questions of dependence and independence, see Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, “A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State,” Signs 19 (Winter 1994): 309–36. “The problem was that women were supposed to be just dependent enough, and it was easy to tip over into excess in either direction. The norm, moreover, was racially marked, as white women were usually portrayed as erring on the side of excessive dependence, while black women were typically charged with excessive independence” (325).


62. Erikson, Childhood and Society, 241–46. In other cases, “the children themselves learn to disavow their sensual and overprotective mothers as temptations and a hindrance to the formation of a more American personality,” Erikson noted that historically this “oral sensory treasure” contributed to the development of “mild, submissive, dependent” identities in slaves, but suggested that relative to the sexual repression many whites experienced, blacks and other immigrant groups were “privileged in the enjoyment of a more sensual early childhood” (245). See too Johnson, Growing Up in the Black Belt, 225; and Smith, Killers of the Dream, 100, for positive assessments of “unrepressed” blacks.

Nearly a hundred years ago, Dr. William Lee Howard, commenting on the dangerous prominence of feminist activism in the United States, wrote in the New York Medical Journal that “emancipated” women were responsible for creating effeminate boys and masculine girls, a mos: undesirable outcome which, the doctor suggested, was tantamount to the nation’s decay.1 Teddy Roosevelt voiced similar sentiments in 1917, on the eve of America’s entry into World War I, when he launched an attack on the women-led peace and antidraft movements by singling out the image of the pacifist mother whose pathological attachment to her son was turning him into an emasculated coward, thus hastening moral disintegration and heading the nation into ruin.2 But “mom”-bashing gained industrial strength during the decade following World War II, as bad mothers became powerful career vehicles for a host of sexist columnists, legislators, movie directors, and, most notably, psychiatrists who heaped upon mothers culpability for everything from juvenile delinquency to totalitarianism.3

The history of blaming mothers for American political problems reveals how norms of gender and sexuality, far from being isolated in “private” realms of the individual personality or the family, are very much public matters. For although fathers were occasionally implicated in the making of properly gendered citizens, again and again throughout the twentieth century, mothers have been held primarily responsible for producing psychologically sound Americans. Within a binary and hierarchical construction of gender, individuals are directed to take their places as proper citizens, behaving appropriately according to their identity as
either men or women and maturing into healthy, adjusted heterosexuals, whose social and biological reproduction is deemed essential to the integrity of the self and, metonymically, the nation. Mother’s job is to make boys into sufficiently masculine men and girls into feminine women. In America during the twentieth century, one can find striking correlations between moments when cultural norms of gender and sexuality are destabilized and waves of political anxiety that manifest in mother-blaming.

While historians have analyzed the relationship between Cold War rhetoric, sexism, and the “mom”-bashing that emerged in the 1940s, few have considered the specifically homophobic dimensions of this triumvirate. This essay examines how the popularized resurgence of mother-blaming was fueled by a misogynist and homophobic backlash against a perceived erosion of gender distinctions occurring during the war. Reactionary critics especially cited women’s increased participation in the public spheres of employment, politics, and culture as evidence of this troubling erosion. In this context, lesbians and gay men, imagined primarily as gender inverters, signified the breakdown of clearly delineated gender roles, and their purported prevalence in American society was blamed on the errant behavior of the nation’s “moms.” Following the war, gay and lesbian communities in major U.S. cities expanded dramatically as many homosexual veterans opted to take up residence in places like San Francisco, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, rather than return to the smaller towns of their origin. The growing political visibility of gay men and lesbians, which increased in the 1950s with the formation of homophile political organizations, contributed to a climate of Cold War anxiety among those who saw homosexuality, like communism, as inimical to American society. As part of a sweeping backlash, the figure of the demonic “mom” functioned not only to generate prescriptive norms of motherhood but to unleash homophobic stereotypes, in the service of an expressly misogynist national agenda premised on compulsory heterosexuality and the hierarchical organization of masculinity and feminity that underpinned it. The stereotypes of the seditious gay man and the treasonous lesbian reveal the complex ideological maneuvers that tied the psychological domains of the individual and family to a nationalistic zeal for American global supremacy.

Besides the notorious communist, during the early years of the Cold War, another figure was singled out and characterized as demonic, treasonous, and fundamentally antithetical to the welfare and security of the United States. The so-called “sex pervert” threatened to weaken the nation through his sexual indiscretions and effeminate predilections. In showcased congressional hearings and highly publicized internal security campaigns, the typical “sex pervert” brought under this hostile national spotlight was the white, middle-class, college-educated homosexual man who was most likely an FDR Democrat, employed either in the State Department or some other office of foreign service. The loyalty and national security programs, implemented first by Truman in 1946 and then elaborated by Eisenhower in the 1950s, used the term “sex perversion” virtually interchangeably with male homosexuality. Initially, they targeted gay men as “bad security risks,” likely to succumb, like love-starved women, to the advances of a hunky Soviet spy or to give away secrets out of fear of blackmail. As the security programs expanded by successive executive orders, “sex perverts” came to be seen not merely as bad security risks but as fundamentally disloyal, with behaviors, practices, and lives that were contrary to the American way of life. Like the Reds, whose allegiance was to international communism, and the Jews who were believed to put Zionism before all else, male homosexuals answered to an internationalist anti-American authority—that of perverse desire itself—that had infiltrated the heart of American society, threatening to cause its decay from within. In the words of Countess R. G. Wadek, whose passionate treatise The Homosexual International, appeared in the Congressional Record in 1952,
profession. One need only turn to the psychoanalytic literature of the period to find lively and rather vitriolic constructions of the most treasonous sissies and gay-girls. And there too we will find the origin of their evil and perversion: the specter of the ruinous mom!

Strikingly, ideologues of the 1940s and 1950s elevated the domestic sphere to a highly privileged domain in their formulations about the health and welfare of the nation. Since the American Revolution, the long-standing tradition of Republican Motherhood had emphasized womanly civic virtue and the importance of separating public and domestic spheres to ensure the moral education of American children. And, significantly, during World War I, patriots deployed the figure of the self-sacrificing mother to inspire military discipline and devotion to the nation. However, the ideological valorization of the domestic sphere immediately following World War II was pronounced in its intensity. Indeed, this postwar "family boom" was part and parcel of a multifaceted and highly orchestrated ideological campaign to move women back into a position of subordination to men, as loyal wives and mothers. It was fueled, in part, by a backlash against the relative degree of economic self-sufficiency and social mobility women achieved as a result of well-paid employment in wartime industrial production. To make room for returning veterans, women were encouraged to return to the home, marry, and have children, thus helping to restore American society and ensure the status of the United States as an international economic and political power.

This conservative agenda cast the normal and robust American family in decidedly white, middle-class, and nucleated terms, with a breadwinning father, a housewife mother, and two or three gender-appropriate children. Extended families, families headed by women, and families including mothers who had to work outside the home to make ends meet, particularly common among working-class communities of African Americans and first- and second-generation European and Asian immigrants, were seen as inferior—if sometimes quaint—in comparison to the idealized patriarchal middle-class family. In this postwar articulation of what the Right now calls "family values," the home figured once again, as it had in nineteenth-century bourgeois ideology, as a haven in a heartless world. Its twentieth-century version was an architecturally discrete and psychologically sound site in which to cultivate the moral strength of the nation. But what most distinguished the postwar cult of domesticity from earlier versions was its palpable paranoia, manifesting
in anxieties over unsavory influences that threatened the home not only from without but from within.17

Psychiatrists associated with the mental hygiene movement in the second decade of the century, had long devoted their energies to defining and promoting the country’s health and psychological welfare.18 They saw the family as central to maintaining mental hygiene, but no more so than schools, churches, communities, and workplaces. As World War II came to a close, many of the same professionally credentialed men who had been involved in mental hygiene campaigns and military psychiatry, intensified their focus specifically on the family, approaching it as a unit requiring careful monitoring and expert intervention to ensure the integrity of the nation’s future citizens. The maternal role involved the greatest responsibility and elicited the most professional advice. Conferring enormous ideological power upon the middle-class nuclear family, these experts placed women of all classes in a particular kind of double bind: as wives they were to stand dutifully and submissively by their husbands, while at the same time, as mothers, they were to exert power, preeminently by instilling standards of virtue and patriotic self-sufficiency in their children. Assigned the task of ensuring biological, psychological, and social reproduction in the home, a mother needed to center her life around others. Without her family she was nothing. Women who by choice or necessity did not marry or have children, and those who worked outside of the home, were regarded as fundamentally selfish and neglectful. In return for her efforts, the self-sacrificing mother could either receive honorific, if patronizing, credit, or have blame heaped upon her for any character weaknesses among the citizenry. The most complicated of her tasks consisted of exercising the proper measure of discipline and attentiveness to produce a healthy child: she was to be neither smothering nor neglectful. A vast number of advice books, geared to middle-class mothers, brought the most minute gestures and habits into the realm of “childrearing.” These texts encouraged mothers to be self-monitoring in their every move.19 Psychiatrist George Henry, for example, suggested that mothers take an active role in preventing homosexuality by first setting good examples of femininity and then making sure their children engaged in gender-appropriate activities. “There is no adequate substitute for well-adjusted mothers. . . . A girl should not only have knowledge of domestic activities but should engage in these activities until she feels secure in actually performing them and in supervising their performance. Likewise a boy should be trained in the mechanics and the responsibilities of maintaining a home.”20 According to the psychoanalytic perspective framing advice of this sort, even those behaviors not seemingly related to a woman’s maternal role made a difference in children’s development, for the child’s most crucial figure for constituting identity was the mother. Her every move had an impact on her children’s psychological health, and, of course, her femininity was the foundation for developing properly gendered citizens.

Endowing the middle-class family with the power to ensure or destroy the nation put middle-class mothers in a politically significant role, but one which was implicitly meant to contain them in a domain outside the public sphere of lawmakers and commerce. Meanwhile their working-class counterparts, laboring inside and outside the home, were increasingly blamed for raising rebellious juvenile delinquents incapable of discerning right from wrong. While fortifying a separation between public and private domains, the marriage of “family values” and Cold War ideology made the suburban split-level home a key staging ground for proper citizenship, even as suburbanites increasingly complained of the malaise, loneliness, and alienation brought on by the isolation and cultural homogenization of their neighborhoods.21 According to Cold War family values, mothers and fathers assumed highly differentiated roles, with gender-specific criteria for what counted as loyalty or treason. Deviation from one’s proper gender role suggested anti-Americanism, as effeminacy in men and masculinity in women increasingly came to be seen as threats to domestic and national security. In psychiatric and popular writing of the time, gender and sexual disorder both signified and caused national disorder. For women in particular, politically dangerous neurotic behavior was most powerfully exemplified either in their flawed, narcissistic, and brutal methods of childrearing, or in their total dissent from the roles of wife and mother.

The tendency to blame mothers that intensified during this period actually started as the Second World War was still raging, when a man of audaciously woman-hating opinions, wholly untrained in psychiatry, offered his thoughts on the subject of motherhood. In his 1942 bestseller, Generation of Vipers, popular columnist Philip Wylie, coined the term “momism” to describe the destructive tendency among the overwhelming majority of American mothers to stifle, dominate, and manipulate their children—particularly sons—into submission and crippling weakness.22 Wylie, a self-described “motherless” man, stressed the importance of American military might in earlier magazine columns warning of the
threats of communism and fascism. But in Vipers, Wylie tied this militarist zeal to a vitriolic critique of mothers, by drawing the character of the sexually frustrated, self-righteous, manipulative “mom,” who dominated her husband, cultivated her son’s dependence, and brought the nation’s enemy, totalitarianism, literally home to roost. In Wylie’s text, the family became the pit of hell for men and boys under the tyrannical dominion of pathological mothers. Mom’s destructive power, for Wylie, was a horrid by-product of civilization, brought on by women’s pillage of men’s money, their right to vote, and their subsequent capacity to “rape the men, not sexually, unfortunately, but morally.” Women’s voting patterns were to blame for an “all-time low in political scurriness, hoodlumism, ... moral degeneration, civic corruption, ... homosexuality, drunkenness, financial depression, chaos and war.”23 Besides causing internal decay, this disdained character, “mom,” encompassing women of all social classes, hastened the nation’s vulnerability to outside forces by way of destroying independent-minded men.

As cultural historian Michael Rogin has noted, Wylie’s second edition of Vipers, published during the apex of McCarthyism in 1955, described both motherhood and communism as deceptive forces against which the individual man must defend himself.24 Wylie, like other American Cold Warriors, made use of American antifascist ideology dating from wartime to equate Nazism and communism as totalitarian systems that destroyed individualism and promoted mindless conformity. Moms were the secret agents of totalitarianism, displacing or uprooting the traditional paternal power that had previously ensured healthy individuality and prosperity. By violating the son’s boundaries between self and other, moms created a window of opportunity, or to borrow Cold War parlance, ripped a seam in the Iron Curtain, through which a dangerous and disguised enemy could maneuver. Thus moms recruited effectively for both fascism and communism, since, once infected by momism, sons were unable to make independent decisions and were drawn in by totalitarian theories. Totalitarianism benefited from the mother’s narcissism and voracious appetite for power. Through her, it commandeered the psychological apparatus of the domestic sphere and took control of men.25

Several years after Wylie published Vipers, military psychiatrist Edward Strecker elaborated on the horrors of momism, this time giving the concept the luster of scientific truth. From the early years of his career, Strecker had been affiliated with the mental hygiene movement, which focused on preventing mental disturbances and encouraged individuals to “adjust” to the psychological demands of modern society. His early research, undertaken while a major in the U.S. Army Medical Corps during World War I, focused on shell shock, as well as the prevention of alcoholism and sex crimes. As professor of psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania and psychiatric consultant to the surgeon general of the navy, Strecker authored textbooks and a number of popular books dealing with child psychiatry, morale, psychiatry and war, and the psychological perils of mass society, subjects that appealed to middle-class audiences.26 His tangential interest in the problem of homosexuality grew when, in 1935, he joined the interdisciplinary Committee for the Study of Sex Variants, which was conducting extensive research on homosexuality in New York City in an effort to determine the cause and prevalence of “sex variance,” as well as to recommend ways of preventing it and thus to stem the purported increase of this “maladjustment” in modern urban America.

In 1941 the Committee published its findings, which stressed the importance of parental guidance in ensuring that girls are adequately feminine and boys adequately masculine.27 Following this, Strecker became a tireless critic of mothers, initially offering his wisdom on the subject in public lectures and a regular column in The Ladies’ Home Journal.28 These ventures led to two popular books on the menace of moms, Their Mothers’ Sons, published in 1946, which focused on the damage done to sons, and its companion volume Their Mothers’ Daughters, published ten years later with coauthor Vincent Lathbury.29 Both books are condescending and pompous, based not on any empirical research but simply on Strecker’s impressions, spurred by his startling realization, while working as a military psychiatrist during the war, that 20 percent of potential recruits were rejected for neuropsychiatric reasons. Ostensibly the books are manuals advising mothers on childrearing, but: throughout, Strecker used psychiatric anecdotes to launch political commentary, arguing that the nation’s weakness was due to bad mothering. To perform this commentary, Strecker distinguished between mothers, who were good, and moms, who were bad (something Wylie hadn’t bothered to do), leaving the role of fathers in childrearing unanalyzed, except to occasionally disparage Mom’s counterpart, “Pop,” an immature man lacking the masculine strength necessary to be a good citizen or effective parent.30

In Strecker’s view, mothers “brought into the world the sturdy flesh, blood and sinew and activated it with the spirit of indomitable [sic] morale.” They contributed good genes and good training and were not
overbearing but “quiet in their diplomatic interventions,” encouraging their children to make independent decisions. Moms, by contrast, prevented their children from maturing by keeping a tight hold on the “silver cord,” the “emotional umbilical cord.” Mom’s sons never matured adequately. Many became feminine and homosexual as a result of their mother’s desire to have a daughter or her untoward affections, which caused sons to take flight from heterosexuality.31 Some of mom’s most immature and cowardly sons were those who went so far as to wear women’s clothing to get out of military service.32 The daughters of moms were deeply damaged psychologically, as manifested in symptoms of resistance to marriage and childbirth, as well as sympathy with feminism and often sexual desire for other women.

In Strecker’s scheme, moms were both throwbacks to a previous stage of evolution when violence and cruelty were common human expressions, and distinctly modern. They manifested psychological, if not biological, degeneracy due to conflicts between their maternal instinct and their ambitions in the business world and other domains previously limited to men.33 Under the general category Strecker delineated many types of moms, including the narcissistic mom, the self-sacrificing mom, the pollyanna mom, the ailing mom, and the humorless “pseudointellectual,” who took courses and attended lectures but was nothing more than a dilettante. Mom, whatever her specific type, had a primary pathological tendency: “the emotional satisfaction, almost repletion, she derives from keeping the children paddling about in a kind of psychological amniotic fluid rather than letting them swim away with the bold and decisive strokes of maturity away from the emotional maternal womb.”34

Moms, of course, were generally women. But Strecker used the monstrous figure of mom as a sign under which all evil and corruption could be placed. In his words, “not all substitute moms are flesh and blood.” “Moms in a bottle” referred to alcoholism. Other “mom surrogates” included not only overbearing grandmothers and other female relatives but also things as far flung as psychoneuroses, mental hospitals, religion, social movements, collective mob consciousness, national isolationism, labor unions, and even the army. All of them encouraged dependence and escape. Strecker, like Wylie, was horrified by the “mass man,” that pitiful creature who lost any ability to think for himself and was incapable of asserting his individual character in the face of the mediocre crowd or the slavishly devoted mob. He described America’s wartime enemies as stripped of individual will and self-determination by the ravages of mom-

ism writ large. In Strecker’s view, Nazism was a “Momarchy,” a mom surrogate with a swastika for a heart, and Hitler’s mania was all the more pathological because of its tendency toward feminine irrationality:

The Fuehrer had all the qualities and ingredients which go into the making of a super-mom. He even had the feminine note of hysteria which may be heard in the voices of moms when they are battling for their children and, if need be, are willing to give their lives for them. . . . Here indeed was a mom who never forgot his children.35

Intensifying the horrific specter of the violent mom, Strecker continued, saying that for those who did not comply, the Nazi mom “wielded a bloody whip of torture and death.”36 The Japanese, too, suffered from the totalitarian effects of momism, and it was their social immaturity that led to their defeat. Callously brushing off the U.S. military’s decimation of Hiroshima, Strecker added, “I doubt if even the atomic bomb had sufficient explosive force to dis-womb the Japanese people.”37

Strecker’s metaphorical and literal use of the term mom reveals the link between political and psychological discourse typical of much Cold War-era psychiatric theory on child development. Mom invited both the external and internal threats to run their calamitous course in the psyche, the family, the nation, and the world. And it was particularly her ability to thwart American individualism among her children that made mom, like communism and fascism, an inimical force threatening to level all distinctions between people and render the world’s population an undifferentiated mob.

To avoid such a catastrophe, Strecker offered his sage advice to mothers. He allowed that “the Mother’s Dilemma” of having to care for children while also encouraging them to grow independent required mothers to maintain a delicate balance. A thin line separated proper and improper parenting. It was a mother’s responsibility to understand the difference in order to ensure her child’s success and maturity. Maturity and immaturity figured as key measures of adjustment, health, and citizenship in Strecker’s framework, which valorized traditional Yankee values of industriousness and individualism. The mature individual was reliable, cooperative, tolerant, patient, respectful of authority, pliable, and persevering. An ability to fit in tempered the mature individual’s will. Immaturity, on the other hand, manifested in uncooperative behavior, resistance, insubordination, and the inability or unwillingness to be self-sufficient. It caused most human failures, and worsened with each genera-
tion since immature moms gave rise to immature adults who would surely wreak the same havoc on their children. Not surprisingly, moms were to blame for lesbianism and male homosexuality, which Strecker, following a basic tenet of psychoanalytic thinking, saw as particularly glaring expressions of immaturity.

In Their Mothers’ Sons, Strecker opened with dire statistics supposedly signifying the terrible impact on the nation’s military caused by women who refused to allow their sons to grow up. He positioned mom as an internal force of evil, responsible for the millions of men who were unfit to fight for their country in World War II. Those men who appeared to be lacking in manliness most exasperated him. He made his opinions on this matter clear in a chapter on homosexuality, where he cautioned mothers to loosen the stifling grip of maternal love and allow sons to overcome the Oedipal crisis in order to become healthy, masculine heterosexuals. Mothers who tried to make their sons into daughters, those who spoke negatively about heterosexuality, and those who treated their sons as potential lovers thwarted the complex achievement of heterosexual normalcy upon which American democracy was based. The degree to which a son’s masculinity was fostered determined not only his ability to become a mature husband and father but, even more importantly, to achieve honor in civic and military duties. Strecker reminded his readers that effeminacy, which signified male homosexuality, barred many men from wartime service and made them both a national burden and potential agents of sedition.38

While most other psychiatrists and commentators believed sons were the main victims of mom’s tyranny, Strecker stressed the devastating effects momism had on daughters. Since mothers were primarily responsible for turning children into citizens, Strecker argued that rearing daughters to be good wives and mothers was a necessary first step to strengthening the family and, consequently, the nation. He lamented that he had not written the volume on daughters first, stating that, above all else, the nation needed proper mothers to turn boys into proper men who would be the leaders of tomorrow. Daughters distorted by demonic mothers would most certainly either become wicked moms to a new generation or be so traumatized as to forego the basic instinct of motherhood in favor of the corrupt and “counterfeit” sexuality of lesbianism.

One of the most serious dangers daughters faced was feminism, Strecker opined in a chapter-long diatribe in Their Mothers’ Daughters. In “Feminism—the Biological Rejection,” Strecker qualified his equation of maturity with independence, noting that women who seek total autonomy were pathological and lacking in femininity, the necessary biological motivation and psychological art of being a woman. Feminism itself, he noted, was a rejection of femininity, resulting from a girl’s unhealthy response to the Oedipus complex, whereby she refused to separate from her mother and developed a competitive and envious attitude toward her father, whom the girl perceived as stealing her mother’s love. The daughter’s inability to have all of her mother’s love led to ongoing frustration and envy. The pathological mom, who fostered a daughter’s prolonged attachment, contributed to the daughter’s disturbed sentiments. This, commonly coupled with the mother’s rejection of her own femininity, prevented the daughter from becoming a healthy and happy heterosexual woman, locking the girl forever in a form of latent lesbianism that manifested in an affinity for feminism.

Strecker and his coauthor, Lathbury, saw this rejection of femininity as tragic, noting that many women who aspired to success in business and professions were fundamentally unhappy, having renounced femininity, heterosexuality, and motherhood. This led the authors to claim that feminism was a pathological symptom posing as a political sensibility, brought on by the frustration or denial of essential maternal instincts, and

the deep wish to compete with men not because it may be necessary or the circumstances of life demand it, but prompted by the desire to prove the male is inferior to the female. . . . Feminism is a defense reaction against the repressed and intolerably painful feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness as women. . . . If for a minute they stop thinking and proving to one and all that women are better than men, then from childhood memories might emerge the unbearable thought that really women are not worth anything.39

Renouncing feminism, not femininity, would restore a woman to health and happiness. Dedication to marriage and motherhood could allay her suffering and strengthen the nation. Clearly, the authors had a gender-specific scheme: independence was a necessary asset for male citizens, while for female citizens, wisely dependence and maternal attentiveness were key.

In a chapter entitled “Lesbianism—the Biological and Psychological Treason,” Strecker and Lathbury continued their attack on women’s independence from men, echoing a Spenserian notion that homosexuality
was "enervating and devitalizing," and arguing that tolerance of this "social threat" would lead to the destruction of civilization. Lesbianism was an extreme manifestation of a daughter's Oedipal frustration that manifested initially in resentment toward men and then in choosing women lovers who symbolized the original mother figure. Thus lesbianism signaled immaturity resulting from a grave pathological interruption in the female's normal development process toward becoming a wife and mother.

Moms produced lesbians in a number of ways, according to Strecker and Lathbury. Some poisoned their daughters against heterosexuality by describing it as repulsive. In addition, moms often expressed either too much or not enough affection toward their daughters, thus either thwarting the process of maturation or triggering the daughters' neurotic quest to make up for a lack of love. But moms not only induced lesbianism in their daughters; their own pathological behaviors were construed by Strecker and Lathbury as indications of latent lesbianism. Among the pronounced signs of this latency were a mother's bitterness about her maternal role and her resentment toward her husband or men in general. So not only did moms make lesbians; they were lesbians within a broad psychoanalytic construction of the term. Moreover, the most destructive moms were described as masculine, domineering, envious of men, and castrating, qualities they shared with the stereotypical bull daggcr. The "treason" they committed was against normative codes of gender and sexuality, and, by implication, against the family and nation.

In much of the Cold War-era psychiatric literature, standards of maturity were different for men and women. In Strecker's own view, maturity for boys and men connoted freedom from maternal entanglements and was defined by separateness. For girls, freedom and separateness were desirable only to a degree. They quickly became signs of pathological selfishness if, for example, a woman did not have a child. Women who did not have children were aberrant and likely to unleash their frustrated maternal desires on society. For Strecker, the instinct of motherhood was universal and primordial. However, in modern American society it had gone afoul. The situation was worsening because the preponderance of immature women meant the problem would be reproduced exponentially in future generations. The threat of a Sapphic population explosion loomed large. For women and especially for lesbians, "biological treason" against childbirth became, in Strecker's view, a form of political sedition.

After logging and detailing all of the damage that moms could do, Strecker went on to endow mothers with the important responsibility of teaching democracy in the home, where they transformed children into citizens. Warning that civilization was held in the balance of this fine art of motherhood, Strecker spied forth an apocalyptic rhapsody:

Again the time will come when world combat will threaten. If it should come to another world war, the result might very well be the annihilation of our civilization and cultures and the final plunge into the abyss of barbarism. When that danger comes, those adults who, in their childhoods, were taught to take at least a few steps along the road of the brotherhood of man will be the human dikes holding back the deluge. . . . [T]here is nothing of which Psychiatry can speak with more confidence and assurance than the danger to our democratic civilizations and cultures from keeping children enwombed psychologically and socially. Here is our gravest menace.40

To solve the problem of momism, Strecker suggested a revamping of the entire social system, since in its present form it encouraged dependence and immaturity. First and foremost, the social prestige moms enjoyed must be taken away. Rather than being valorized through movies and popular media, moms should be condemned for the damage they do. As a matter of national security, they must be prevented from destroying the future citizenry. Second, expert knowledge was crucial. Classes should be developed to prepare boys for fatherhood and girls for motherhood. Parents should be systematically educated on how to be good citizens and responsible role models. If parents—and especially mothers—failed to act appropriately for their sex, homosexuality would surely increase, for children of such parents would be deranged in their own sexual development. Furthermore, the government should be on guard for "mothers' groups" that are fronts for breeding national disunity through their pacifist propaganda. By simultaneously arguing that childrearing was the cornerstone of government and that certain women were not good mothers, Strecker positioned psychiatrists as crucial experts for ensuring national security.

As anxiety about the proliferation of internal enemies intensified during the Cold War, psychiatrists focused heavily on the role of mothers in preventing the political subversion with which gender variance and homosexuality had become aligned. Strecker's texts, like other popular psychiatric tracts written during the Cold War, counseled that to prevent lesbianism and male homosexuality, as well as other character weaknesses
that made an individual vulnerable to subversive political movements, a woman needed to present her children with a role model of the cheerful, dedicated, and feminine mother. As Edward Strecker put it: “Do not become a feminist. Children recoil from masculinity in a mother, in dress and attitude... You may have to be cool and brisk in the business world, but in the home with the youngsters, let your temperature go up and resume the natural psychological curves of your sex.”

Other psychiatrists writing during this period chimed in. If a girl became a lesbian, her mother was largely to blame. Either she had failed to provide a proper model of femininity (by not keeping a clean house, for example, or not showing adoration for her husband), or else she was excessively controlling, domineering, or dependent upon her daughter. In addition, a host of psychoanalytic theories attributed male homosexuality to the so-called “CBI mother”—close, binding, and intimate—whose extraordinary and perverse intimacy interfered with her son’s normal heterosexual pursuits and emasculated him through debilitating guilt. In addition to her own possible tendency toward politically subversive causes, the destructive CBI mother cultivated, unwittingly or unwittingly, the seeds of disloyalty and treason in her children.

After Alfred Kinsey’s best-selling sex surveys from this period reported high rates of homosexual behavior among normal men and women, psychiatrists, who were among Kinsey’s most vociferous opponents, maintained that homosexuality was fundamentally pathological. To counter Kinsey’s claim that homosexuality was not only widespread but perhaps even normal, they argued, among other things, that the future survival of the nation depended on the prevention and elimination of homosexuality. To this end, they developed utterly labyrinthine theories of the aetiology of both male and female homosexuality, speculating that almost anything in the mother, from overbearing tendencies to hostility to excessive affection to indifferent detachment, could cause not only sexual perversion but a proclivity toward political subversion.

During what historian Elaine Tyler May has called the “family boom” of the late 1940s and 1950s, the suburban home came to symbolize security against all kinds of foreign invasions. Its occupants, the nuclear family, figured as a kind of prophylactic against the internal decay of cultural values and external threats of communism and totalitarianism. But as May points out, the wholesome suburban home, rather than staving off the decadence of bureaucratic conformity and consumerism, furtively fostered such decadence through its regimens of parental surveillance over children and its orgies of home furnishing. According to popular psychiatric writing of the time, Mom hastened moral corruption, surrounded as she was by modern appliances, trapped, frustrated, and neurotic, behind the double doors of her ranch-style dream home, suffering from the “problem that has no name.” Betty Friedan later identified in more sympathetic terms in The Feminine Mystique. Mom was the agent of internal decay, browbeating her children and husband, succumbing, in bitterness, to agoraphobia, or worse, feminism and communism. Through her treachery, Mom undermined the home as a bastion of security, and planted the seeds of cultural ruin in the very garden where she was to be cultivating the next generation to become productive and dutiful citizens. Her queer children were the signifiers of cultural decay and national impotence. Her treason and that of her homosexual sons and lesbian daughters threatened the nation from its deepest interiors: the female body, the psyche, the home.

NOTES
This essay benefited immensely from the comments and suggestions of Mary Louise Adams, Angus MacLaren, Andrea Slane, Jacqueline Urla, and the editors of this volume.


3. For an overview of Cold War movies that dovetailed with the general trend toward mom-bashing see Michael Regin, “Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies,” in Ronald Reagan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 236–71.


8. In the committee transcripts the only kind of woman to whom explicit reference is made is either the sultry dame alleged to be on the Kremlin’s payroll and charged with the task of using her seductive powers to draw state secrets out of vulnerable and unwitting men, or the infamous adulteress whose excessive sexual desires and fundamentally treasonous nature compromise not only the security of the home but of the nation.


10. A masterful survey of wartime psychiatric studies of homosexuality is presented in Allan Bérubé, Coming Out under Fire, chaps. 1 and 6.


19. For example, see Henry, Sex Variants and All the Sexes; Benjamin Spock, The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1946).


23. Wylie, Generation of Vipers, 188–89.
24. Rogin, "Kiss Me Deadly," 242–43. Wyle, Generation of Vipers, 2d ed. (New York: Rinehart, 1955). Other works by Wylie along these lines include Smoke across the Moon, a serialized novel published during the 1940s in the Saturday Evening Post, which warned about the evils of communism; When Worlds Collide, written with Edwin Balmer (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1939), a science fiction novel, which was turned into a Hollywood movie in 1951, about the destruction of the earth and the escape of a group of white Americans to a new and virgin planet; and Tomorrow (New York: Rinehart, 1954), a novel warning of the dangers of communism and momism, and promoting rearmament for a nuclear war to save the United States.
25. Marvelous cinematic depictions of mothers who use their sons' pathological attachments to them as a way of undermining American political order and inviting communism to take over are presented in My Son John (1952) and The Manchurian Candidate (1962). For analyses see Rogin, "Kiss Me Deadly," 50–60.
27. The Committee for the Study of Sex Variants first reported its findings in Henry, Sex Variants (1941).
30. Stecker, Sons, 331.
32. Stecker, Sons, 18.
33. Stecker and Lathbury, Daughters, 40.
34. Stecker, Sons, 54–69.
35. Stecker, Sons, 104, 122, 133, 134.
37. Stecker, Sons, 139.
38. Stecker, Sons, 128–32.
41. Stecker and Lathbury, Daughters, 71.

47. May, *Homeward Bound*.


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Chapter 9

**Bad/Good, Good/Bad**

**Birth Mothers and Adoptive Mothers**

Betty Jean Lifton

Everyone has two mothers, according to Freud: the good mother and the bad mother. The psychological task is to bring them together as two parts of the same woman.

I never knew quite what to do with this Freudian insight, for, as an adoptee, I literally had two mothers: my birth mother and my adoptive mother. Both of them were good, and both of them were bad. Which meant I had four mothers.

But—and this is important—they were each good and bad in their own way.

My adoptive mother existed for me in the real here and now. She was always there for me. In that, she was a good mother. My birth mother existed in the shadowy there and then. She disappeared on me. In that, she was a bad mother.

My birth mother gave me life. Good mother. My adoptive mother couldn't give me life. Bad mother.

Good mother/bad mother. Which is which? What is good? What is bad? It is all in the eyes of the perceiver.

In the eyes of society, the married adoptive mother is good and the unmarried birth mother is bad. The adoptive mother is the virtuous woman who rescues an abandoned child and saves her from the orphanage, or the gutter, by making the child her own. She may tell her daughter (or son) the stock story that Mother loved you so much that she gave you up, but children are not fools. The adopted child senses that she was bad, or that maybe her mother was bad: perhaps a prostitute or a drug addict. Why else has she not been invited to birthday parties or to Thanksgiving dinner?