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# The “Wimp Bill” Fights Back!

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Maryland may be the first state to study the link between the traditional demands of masculinity and chronic social problems.

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By Jack Kammer

**O**nly Richard Nixon, it is said, could have gone to China. His unassailable reputation for being tough on communism freed him to make friendly overtures toward Peking. A noted liberal who attempted the same itinerary and agenda would have been suspected of being a closet communist.

So it was with Elijah E. Cummings and his journey into the uncharted reaches of male socialization. At issue were not his theories on male sociology, but something far more personal and basic: his manhood. Nobody had ever called Elijah Cummings a wimp.

A large man with a powerful physical presence and a hearty laugh, Cummings is a delegate from Baltimore to the Maryland General Assembly. Only he could have sponsored—at least, only he did sponsor—the “Wimp Bill.”

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In January 1985, a small group of men in Baltimore decided that the State of Maryland should take an interest in the connection between traditional expectations of masculinity and chronic social problems such as violence, drug abuse, drunk driving, and broken homes.

One of their number approached a family friend, a member of the Maryland House of Delegates, for help. The legislator, a conservative banker, was not of a mind to sponsor such a concept, but he offered his advice.



**Sponsor of bill the first time around.**

Elijah E. Cummings, delegate from Baltimore; Chairman, Maryland Legislative Black Caucus



**Persuaded not to kill bill.**

Joseph E. Owens, delegate from Montgomery County; Chairman, House Delegates Judiciary Committee



**Co-sponsor of bill the second time around.**

Anne S. Perkins, delegate from Baltimore; President, Women's Political Caucus

"Write down some ideas," he suggested, "and I'll have a resolution drafted. Then you'll have something to show to potential sponsors."

The men dutifully submitted "some ideas." The next thing they knew, their wording, with some legal and procedural niceties, wholly comprised "A Resolution Concerning a Maryland Task Force on Contemporary Manhood."

The Resolution propounded such vague notions as "Whereas there has been little recognition of the peculiar dynamics of being a man in modern society," and "Whereas there is a growing awareness in the mental health and sociological professions that manhood requires more careful understanding," and, wishfully, "Whereas it is the desire of the General Assembly to have a Maryland Task Force on Contemporary Manhood established which would study and encourage academics, professionals, the media, the public, and men to

look more closely at the challenges and status of manhood in our state's society."

Thus equipped, the men began their efforts to find a sponsor. Time was of the essence. If a sponsor could be found by January 31, 1985, only two weeks away, the resolution would receive a priority hearing, meaning they would have at least two weeks notice of a definite hearing date. Without a priority hearing, witnesses would have to be notified in a rush: "We just now learned the hearing date. Can you possibly be in Annapolis tomorrow afternoon?"

...with barely two hours remaining before the priority deadline, the resolution was presented to Cummings.

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Realizing that their unorthodox goal would require an effort extended over several years, the men decided that their first year's objective would be simply to stimulate a public and conspicuous discussion of men's issues.

### The Sponsor

Searching for a sponsor, the men interested in the resolution quickly exhausted their meager legislative contacts. Lawmakers would listen politely, but none would sponsor.

The family friend showed the resolution around the halls of the House of Delegates also, trying—at arm's length, without endorsing the measure in any way—to identify support. Word spread quickly. A group of men want to examine the problems men have! If we pass it, we'll have to start eating quiche! Ha, it's the Wimp Bill.

Quietly, though, other male delegates were telling the legislator that they knew there was a problem, that they were sympathetic to the resolution, but were afraid it would be "offensive to women."

Delegate Elijah E. Cummings, the youngest legislator ever selected to chair the Maryland Legislative Black Caucus, received a call from one of the resolution's supporters, Richard A. Rowe, director of Health and Welfare for the Baltimore Urban League. In November 1984, Rowe had staged a conference, "Black Men: An Endangered Species," that examined how black men are victims not only of racism but of sexism as well. Rowe told Cummings he would be approached about the resolution and asked him to consider it.

On January 31, 1985, with barely two hours remaining before the priority hearing deadline, the resolution was presented to Cummings. He read it, pursed his lips as if to signify he knew full well what he was getting into, and said, "Get me a copy I can sign."

### Jumping the Hurdles

Joseph E. Owens, aka Killer Joe, is a Maryland legislator with a reputation far meaner than he deserves. Personally, he is a kindly grandfather figure, soft-spoken yet firm. Politically, he is the bane of all things frivolous. He is something of a libertarian, who believes that government is too often seduced into meddling with matters it has no business handling at all. As chairman of the Maryland House of Delegates Judiciary Committee, a panel mostly of lawyers, he, a lawyer himself, wields considerable influence over where the government will next venture and where it will not. Many remember him as the man who wrought the defeat of the mandatory seat-belt law, already approved by the state Senate, in 1985.

It was to Joe Owens' committee that the resolution calling for a task force on contemporary manhood was referred for a hearing. Needless to say, he considered it frivolous. Nevertheless, delegate Cummings had beaten the priority hearing deadline, and therefore a hearing had to be scheduled.

Cummings, also a lawyer, is himself a member of the Judiciary Committee. But it was not out of deference to the sponsor that the resolution was referred to the Judiciary. On the contrary, it was because House leadership wanted to make absolutely sure that the Wimp Bill never made its way out of committee to the floor of the Maryland House of Delegates.

The assignment to the Judiciary Committee sealed the resolution's fate. But since the task force's backers had as their objective for 1985 a hearing with heavy media coverage, it was good news indeed. Interest, bloodthirsty as it was, would increase at the prospect of the little David of a Wimp Bill facing off against the Goliath of Joe Owens.

What the bill's proponents had in mind was a scenario like the first *Rocky* movie. It wasn't so important that the Italian Stallion defeat Apollo Creed as that he still be standing at

the end of the final round.

Elijah Cummings, his reputation as a serious, thoughtful leader on the line, grew apprehensive about the hearing. He knew Joe Owens could terminate testimony summarily if he thought it pointless, irrelevant, or frivolous. "Can we pull this off?" he asked his backers. They assured him they could. At least, they *thought* they could.

The supporters of House Joint Resolution 43, as Cummings's legislation was officially known, began a blitz of letters and phone calls, networking with established contacts and reaching for new ones into disciplines of thought and science that had never been considered to be concerned with men's issues.

Marriage counselors, prison experts, therapists for batterers, a "social change consultant" who believes that male stereotypes contribute to industrial inefficiency, a sociologist specifically interested in the causes of violence, an antidrug activist, a psychotherapist specializing in treatment for men, and many others expressed interest, even fascination, with the ideas in Cummings's resolution.

So many expert, credible witnesses made themselves available, in fact, that the resolution's organizers decided they could stage two public events on the hearing date. One would be the hearing itself. The other would be a news briefing on the morning of the hearing for the benefit of the next day's newspapers.

March 14, 1985. Reporters from television and radio stations, newspapers, and wire services had the Wimp Bill on their minds. They got an earful, but not what they expected. The press briefing and the testimony proceeded smoothly.

Joe Owens listened, seemingly with interest. He allowed the hearing to proceed until all witnesses had presented their testimony. The Maryland Commission for Women attended, but only to monitor the hearing. No one opposed the task force.

## The Press

The resolution's proponents had delivered their messages to the legislature. It remained to be seen how the media would convey that message to the public.

Two Baltimore television stations that had attended the press briefing ran cutesy stories that evening interviewing men on the street about their "contemporary manhood."

The *Washington Post* reporter, a sports writer who had been temporarily assigned to Annapolis, began his story with a quote by a southern outdoorsman: "Men are built to hunt, fight, and make love. Anything else is a distraction."

But most stories were straightforward, many even favorable. Baltimore's *Sun* ran a story headlined, "It's Not a Joking Matter, Witnesses Tell Hearing." The Baltimore *News-American* carried on its front page a United Press International story entitled simply "Study of Manhood in State Sought." Baltimore's *Evening Sun* had a story from the Associated Press: "Manhood Panel Plan Draws Snickers—Also Supporters."

Washington's and Baltimore's all-news radio stations broadcast interviews with one of the effort's organizers.

Furthermore, in a lead up to the hearing, columnists for the *Sun* and *Evening Sun* had written strongly supportive pieces, one of them noting in a headline that "Confronting Men's Frailties Lacks a Macho Appeal."

Even the sarcastic coverage was good, proponents knew. It's embarrassing for men to hear a discussion of manhood. The news stories, even the caustic ones, were a means of deactivating the blushing.

The goal for 1985 had been met and exceeded: interesting press briefing, credible hearing, extensive media coverage.

It was with little regret, then, two weeks later, after the story had played, that Elijah Cummings counted noses on the Judiciary Committee, realized the resolution

would not pass, and asked chairman Owens not to bring it to a vote.

Soon after Cummings's decision was made public by the Associated Press, the *News-American* published a facetious editorial, "Bad News for Us Wimps." By contrast, the *Sun*, Baltimore's more respected newspaper, praised Cummings's effort in an editorial headlined "Is It a Man's World?"

"Frankly," Joe Owens said, "the first thing is that I have a built-in prejudice against these resolutions. I just don't believe in task forces because I haven't seen many of them that came up with much. And you certainly don't need a resolution out of the Maryland General Assembly to have a task force. If people are interested in it, they can form some group and study it. The use of task forces has gotten out of hand. There's a task force on everything that stirs."

Does Joe Owens think men have problems? "I think that to some extent, with the emphasis on women's so-called rights, that men have been a little neglected. I just don't think the legislature should get involved. I don't think you are ever going to do away with the fact that there is a little more stress on men."

## Regrouping

"When I first heard about this idea," Elijah Cummings said, "I laughed too. But when I took a look at the statistics, especially for black men in this society, I stopped laughing."

"The legislature sits here every day listening to social problems. There's problems with child support, drug abuse, violence, alcoholism, drunk driving. These are things the state is concerned with. Prisons, mental hospitals. All of them involve men more than women, and I just don't buy the answer that that's the way men are."

"I think I was able to accomplish what I wanted to accomplish. I wanted to get beyond people's shock of just the whole nature of the bill. We were talking about serious

nuts-and-bolts issues when they expected to hear us talking about flowers and poetry."

Was Cummings satisfied with the testimony at the hearing? "You didn't see any lawmakers laughing. And I felt really good that some of the delegates who were making quiche and wimp jokes came to me later and apologized. They admitted they had spoken too soon, before they knew what we were really all about."

After Cummings withdrew the resolution from Judiciary Committee consideration, he told the press he would reintroduce his proposal, but not until 1987 when new legislators would be taking office.

Over the spring and summer of 1985, however, Cummings received so much praise from his constituency for recognizing the plight of men—especially black men—that he hinted to his supporters that he might reintroduce it in 1986. "Churches invite me in to talk about men, and I have them clapping and crying. People know something is going on, and they are happy that somebody has finally started talking about it."

In the fall of 1985, Cummings confirmed his change of plan. He would go right back to the General Assembly in 1986: "We have momentum and we have to keep the ball rolling."

He asked the group who had worked on H.J.R. 43 to formulate a new resolution for 1986. "We convinced the legislators that there is a problem," he instructed, "but we didn't make it clear why the state should get involved. Come up with a different wording and focus on one thing. Answer this question: What can the state do?"

The group went back to work and, in a series of meetings and consultations, devised a formula for 1986. They called attention to the state's currently existing social agencies and institutions and suggested that these state mechanisms for social betterment could increase their effectiveness by considering the role

men's issues play in the state's social problems.

The 1986 "whereas" clauses are concrete and narrow; they work in sets of two or three to mention an agency's jurisdiction, then cite a statistic indicating that men as a group should receive more preventive attention from that agency.

One pair of clauses, for instance, quotes the official Maryland Manual in stating that "the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene is established to assure the people of Maryland their inherent right to a healthful environment and a high level of physical, mental and social health." The second clause in the pair notes that "in a recent typical year (1982), Maryland males, though comprising less than half the population, committed 76.4 percent of Maryland's suicides."

Originally, the wording concerning men's problems about divorce noted that "alienation and withdrawal among men can cause reluctance to fulfill obligations as husbands and fathers." The phraseology for 1986 is more succinct and agency related: "Whereas the Support Enforcement Administration attempts to enforce child support orders against noncustodial divorced parents who are predominantly fathers . . ."

The intended effect is not so much to provide information as to raise the possibility that "the way it's always been" is not necessarily the way it always has to be, and that state agencies could benefit from a new approach to men and their problems—not just for men, but for everybody.

In support of the 1986 effort, Cummings's allies also compiled an impressive list of statistics portraying the sad and socially costly plight of many men. The list includes facts on alcoholism, drug abuse, homicide, suicide, traffic deaths, imprisonment, psychiatric admissions, fatherless homes, and life expectancy.

The new resolution has a new name as well. The male approximation of motherhood and apple pie is

embodied in the new title: "The Task Force on Manhood, Fatherhood, and Family."

### A New Ally

In 1985 the task force idea had to overcome not only the wimp factor, but also fear on the part of some sympathetic legislators that the measure might be offensive to women.

Co-sponsorship in 1986 by delegate Anne Perkins should put that apprehension permanently to rest. Though delegate Perkins, like delegate Cummings, is offering her support as an individual legislator, not as the leader of a group, it is worth noting that she is president of the Maryland Legislative Women's Caucus. It is also interesting that she serves on the Judiciary Committee and was present at last year's testimony on H.J.R. 43, testimony she describes as "very good."

Aside from her interest in women's issues, Perkins has devoted much of her legislative energy to housing, a topic that provides her an apt analogy to the idea of "The Task Force on Manhood, Fatherhood, and Family."

"Before the issue of homelessness and people needing emergency shelter got to be something that everybody accepted," she said, "one of the most difficult problems we had was to get the state even to recognize that there were any people without homes. So we had to go out and count them."

"Until the state has a way to quantify men's problems and identify them, the state will say they don't exist."

"Now, it may turn out that the best solutions to men's problems are not going to come from the state getting involved, but at the very least, the state can play a role in bringing people together. It might turn out that the most appropriate actions are private sector actions."

Why does delegate Perkins feel the need to hear men's concerns? "As part of the women's movement, I found that many of the people I have been most grateful to are men who

are willing to listen and not just look down on the concerns that women have. So I feel empathy with somebody being responsive and receptive."

What has been the reaction of other women legislators to her co-sponsorship of "Manhood, Fatherhood and Family?" "No reaction one way or the other."

### Ready for Next Time

The Maryland General Assembly convenes every year for 90 days beginning in January. The 1986 resolution's backers scheduled a press briefing for January 8th to introduce the new wording and to announce Anne Perkins's co-sponsorship. When depositors with assets frozen in Maryland's beleaguered savings and loan associations announced a huge march on the statehouse and a rally to be addressed by Ralph Nader—at the same time and just across the street—the task force workers feared they would lose the media's attention.

But it is a sign of the issue's growing strength that, although the TV cameras were getting an eyeful, the press briefing inside earned the attendance of the Associated Press, United Press International, both major Baltimore newspapers, the *Washington Times*, and other, smaller papers. The *Annapolis Capitol* headlined its story, "Now No One's Laughing at 'Wimp' Bill for Men."

The laughing has subsided. The hard statistics are making people think instead.

Perhaps the best sign of all, however, is that Elijah Cummings has won a commitment from the House of Delegates leadership to give the resolution a fighting chance this year, a commitment not to assign it to Killer Joe.

*Jack Kammer's column on men's issues appears in the Baltimore Chronicle. He is talk-show host for "In A Man's Shoes," heard on WCVT-FM, and was a member of the group who first advocated a Maryland task force on men.*