

## COMMENTARY

## American Women



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I will now attempt — not to walk a tight-rope 900 feet above Hell Roaring Canyon (Dean Potter), not to walk into the Everglades naked and emerge alive one year later (“Wild Bill” Belvin), not to climb Mount Everest, reach the summit, and make it back, without tanked oxygen (Reinhold Messner), and not to swim ashore from a submarine, on purpose and alone, on a tiny Pacific island held by 5,000 Japanese soldiers in 1943, then spend weeks or months making life hell for them (B.F. Nash) — no.

Instead, I will attempt here, before your very eyes, to write about American women.

First of all, let me point out that I am married to an American woman, I’m the son of an American woman, and I’m the brother of an American woman. I even have friends who are American women, ranging in age from 5 to 95.

Before I commit myself to saying anything substantial about American women, however, let me recall the comments of Dean Potter, who tried to explain what he was doing above Hell Roaring Canyon to a New York Times reporter:

“When there’s a death consequence, when you are doing things that if you mess up you die, I like the way it causes my senses to peak. I can see more clearly. You can think much faster. You hear at a different level. Your foot contact on the line is accentuated. Your sense of balance is heightened. I don’t

seem to feel that very often, meditating.”

So let me quit meditating and get to it. First, I hope I could never write so whiny a song as the 1970, “American Woman, (stay away from me),” by The Guess Who. They skedaddled back to their “strait-laced, conservative” girls north of the border to write it after a tour here, according to bassist and co-author, Jim Kale.

What bunch of non-hackers. Not big enough to handle real women, instead of blow-up dolls made in Ontario or China or somewhere.

Our women are, on the whole, the most sane, the most cheerful, the most good natured, and the most reliable in times of stress, of any in the world. Also, the most tolerant.

If you don’t think so and you’re a male with whom even one good woman has ever put up, just look in the mirror.

But they are also demanding. There are some things for which most American women have absolutely zero tolerance, such as the traditional Muslim notion of a woman’s place. Which isn’t all that different from the traditional Christian notion or the orthodox Jewish notion of a woman’s place.

(Hey guys, it’s been morning since 1400, when the Renaissance started. You can wake up anytime now and get breakfast, before you miss supper, like Ol’ Dan Tucker.)

Also, American women are as tough-minded as anybody I’ve ever known. True grit is not an uncommon quality in American women (see the Charles Portis novel of that title, or meet my mother, my sister or my wife). And beauty — that breathtaking combination of sensual and smart that defies advertising puffery and mere physical role modeling — is pervasive in

our women, from young to old.

Why? Well, let me just quote someone wiser than I.

“She behaves as if she were beautiful. Most American women do. It is the secret of their charm,” said Oscar Wilde.

She also behaves as if she were sexy, smart, compassionate, independent, bold and bright as a summer morning, as well as steadfast. Most American women do.

For 50 years or so (and really for 235, or so), American women have been sloughing through a major cultural transition here — we all have. But the qualities and characteristics I love so much about American women were there long before the official emergence of feminism, in the 1960s.

Alexis de Tocqueville, that 19th century French sexist who wandered around the country analyzing Americans with typical Gallic self-righteousness, said this about our women: “Although the American woman never leaves her domestic sphere and is in some respects very dependent within it, nowhere does she enjoy a higher station. And if anyone asks me what I think the chief cause of the extraordinary prosperity and growing power of this nation, I should answer that it is due to the superiority of their women.”

So you see, this has been going on for a while.

But I’m not talking about feminism as a political force, although it is certainly that; after all, when you wise up and recognize that 50 percent of the talent pool is just sitting on the bench waiting to get into the game, you’re going to become a lot more powerful.

If a basketball coach had two Michael Jordans ready to take the floor, but he left one on the bench permanently because that Michael Jordan was stamped with a label that said “vaginal American” (in the words of Betty Friedan), wouldn’t you think he was pretty damn stupid? And you’d be right.

When the Chinese recognize this in full, which they’re about to, we’ll be in trouble.

I’m talking about feminism as a consequence of both nature and culture.

Let’s distinguish between qualities that make us all human — generosity and greed, courage and cowardice, integrity and deceit, humility and arrogance, tyranny and tolerance — and those qualities that make our women so extraordinary, as women.

I hear a lot that American women are pampered and spoiled. I’ve even known a few who had to have their way all the time. Especially about what I believed or ate or said, or where I traveled, or when.

But that observation always makes me uncomfortable. The reason is that almost all of us Americans, compared to most people on the planet, are fairly pampered and spoiled.

So it’s not a condition that applies exclusively to women, and yet frequently the comment is applied exclusively to women.

The women I know well have so much discipline that the notion of them being spoiled seems absurd.

American women are also frequently described as “strong,” and some people take that to mean willful and manipulative.

As the novelist John Steinbeck said, “The impulse of the American woman to geld her husband and castrate her sons is very strong.”

No, John, it isn’t, anymore than the impulse to surgically attach wings to the backs of their daughters and invent push-button openers that automatically spread the legs of their wives is very strong in the American man.

Those are human compulsions (to manipulate and remake), but I’m talking about our women, and their “feminism.”

Long and short, we have the best women in the world: the most feminine, the most feminist. Hell, I’d take them anywhere. ■

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