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OP-ED

The Male Manifesto

By Andrew Kimbrell

WASHINGTON
In recent years, many men have awakened to a crisis of their gender. These men have begun to realize that for them and their fathers' generation, the necessities of work and career and the rising divorce rate have eroded their relationship to family, community and the natural world. This frustration and alienation has led an increasing number of men to gather in an loosely organized men's movement.

Most commentators don't seem to know how to react to this movement. The poet Robert Bly's best-selling book, "Iron John," has encouraged thousands of men to venture into wilderness retreats to rediscover the mythic dimensions of masculinity.

While some have sympathized with Mr. Bly's work, many find the sight of men drumming in the woods more humorous than provocative. Others don't know whether to be chagrined or alarmed by the prospect of men's rediscovering role models. Some confess to being a bit nervous about where the movement is headed.

However, few have realized the political potential of the men's movement. Although its roots are in consciousness raising, the movement is forming what many are calling a new politics of masculinity.

The politicization of the movement is based on an understanding that most men are increasingly victimized. Current statistics are grim. Teen-age and adult suicide, homelessness, unemployment, homicide, drug

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Understanding the 'wild man.'

and alcohol addiction, heart disease and a variety of other stress-related health problems plague more men at far higher rates than women.

Men are also experiencing a crisis in the family. Recent polls show that an overwhelming number of men are torn between the hours needed to support their families and the need to share time with their families.

The situation among men who are minorities is even worse. For example, black men have the lowest life expectancy of any segment of the population; more black men are in jail than in college.

In understanding the victimization of men, the movement has not attempted to establish a hierarchy of victimization. Men are resisting the idea, espoused by some feminists, that maleness, and not society's system of controls and production, is responsible for the victimization of women. Finally, men can begin to understand their victimization of others only by acknowledging their own frustrations.

More important, men are realizing that they cannot resolve their problems within the current understanding of "masculinity." Over several generations, men have fallen victim to a defective mythology of manhood — a male mystique. This mystique, propagated during the industrial age, has substituted mechanical attributes — efficiency, autonomy, inhuman power — for such traditional masculine traits as husbandry, honor, relation to community and land.

Most significant, the factory system removed men from the home, leaving a vacuum that has left generations of young men without adequate male parenting or role models. Moreover, the romanticized wars of this century, have killed millions of sons. It is a lingering irony that what many call a patriarchal production system significantly degraded both fatherhood and sonship.

Rejecting both the male mystique and anti-male ideology, men have begun articulating a male manifesto — a political agenda intended to re-establish ties with one other, their families, communities and the earth.

As men mourn the loss of fathers and family, they are devoting themselves to increased parental leave and work-at-home opportunities. As men recover a healthy sense of inner "wildness," they are calling for more environmental protection.

As men try to recover the dignity in their work, they avoid the obeisance often called for in the corporate world in favor of small-scale businesses. As men become aware of male drug addiction, self-destructiveness and stress, they are organizing around men's health issues. As men realize that modern techno-war mocks the inner warrior aspect of men, they reject modern warfare.

As the politics of the men's movement develop, it, like the feminist movement, could change the face of electoral politics. Up to now, women have been more likely than men to support environmental protection and peaceful solutions to world problems. The new politics of men could erase this gender gap.

For those who thought the men's movement was just about drumming or "wild men," they'd better look again. □