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What's the Matter With Men?

July 10, 2025



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Last week, I sat down for an extended interview with Jordan Peterson about the plight of young men in America. He'd read my recent newsletter about the Democratic Party's struggles in reaching male voters — in which I began with a story about how Peterson had positively influenced a young man I'd met — and decided to invite me to chat on his podcast.

The entire conversation was interesting, but there was one moment that I thought crystallized not just how and why so many Americans see the world differently from one another, but also how and why our political disputes become so vicious.

Peterson and I were in broad agreement on a number of fronts, including on the urgent need to address the problems afflicting millions of young men. Simply put, they are flailing and falling behind. While men still do very well at the apex of American society (the chief executives of Fortune 500 companies are still

overwhelmingly male, to give one example), men are lagging women in educational attainment, struggling disproportionately with their mental health, and dying by suicide at rates much greater than women.

But why? At this point, the evidence of men's tribulations is so overwhelming that very few seriously dispute the problem. But understanding the reasons behind the crisis is indispensable to finding a solution.

Early in the podcast, Peterson, a clinical psychologist, made the case for what I'll call the ideological explanation: Men are suffering because of what's been done to them by malign actors, by people who either hate men or see men as fundamentally flawed. Peterson was telling a story about how his son came home from school and told Peterson that he believed he was "doing really well for a boy."

Peterson's explanation for the struggles of young men in schools was rooted in the culture war. "The vast majority of teachers are not only female, but infantilizing female and radically left," he said. Boys, Peterson argued, are "required to sit for hours at a time, which is not in keeping with their nature — especially if they're active, in which case they get diagnosed with A.D.H.D. and get put on methylphenidate."

Young men, he said, are "told that competitive games are wrong," that "ambition is pathological," that marriage is an "oppressive institution," and that "the activities of males are destroying the planet." He painted a picture of a school culture that's ideologically radicalized and systematically undermines men.

It's a mistake to dismiss everything Peterson says here. I distinctly remember the wave of Ritalin prescriptions among young boys that took off in the 1990s. I know that recess has been curtailed and often sanitized (when I was a kid, we'd play tackle football at recess — something that's verboten in many schools today). And there are many school districts that, absurdly enough, ban dodge ball.

But is Peterson's explanation really the dominant explanation for why boys struggle at school? Peterson wasn't offering his account as the exclusive explanation for the difficulties young men face, but it doesn't truly square with the

evidence, or the experience of millions of men.

As Peterson spoke, I thought back to the rural Tennessee community where we raised our son. With the possible exception of shorter and more sedate recesses than generations past, none of the phenomena Peterson outlined applied to our son's life or the lives of his peers.

Most of his teachers were women, but they were almost all conservative and Christian. The wave of medication had mostly crested, and far from shunning competitive sports, our football-loving community embraced competition with open arms. This is life in rural America. It's religious. It's conservative. It loves sports, especially contact sports.

And yet men in rural America arguably struggle even more than the men who live in America's bluest, most progressive cities. Deaths of despair, for example, are worse in rural America, yet rural America is mostly untouched by the "woke mind virus" that the manosphere loves to hate.

There is a competing thesis about the crisis in young men — that it's much less related to ideology than it is to technology. The Industrial Revolution and the information age have fundamentally changed our way of life, and we're still figuring out how to adapt to changes that are inevitable and irresistible. Deindustrialization and the age of information have far more impact on men than any element of the culture war.

Combine the industrial and information revolutions with the lull in great power conflict and the end of the Cold War, and you have factories that need fewer workers (and require less brute strength), armies that need fewer soldiers (and are less dependent on huge infantry formations), and farms that are heavily automated.

Brawn can still be necessary in modern life (I'm reminded of the heroic Coast Guard rescue swimmer credited with saving 165 people from Camp Mystic in Texas), but brainpower is the great equalizer.

At the same time, birth control meant that women were free to regulate the size of their families and pursue careers when they're in the prime of their lives.

All of these things together not only meant that men feel less uniquely necessary to the family, they also have fewer male-only spaces where they meet male role models and encounter a masculine culture. Against this backdrop, when men encounter rhetoric like, "The future is female," they can and do legitimately wonder, "Where is my place in this new world?"

Before, a young man could learn masculinity by osmosis. There wasn't much confusion about what it meant to be a man. Now, a boy has to learn masculinity intentionally. Young men have to be deliberately taught how to find their place and their masculine identity in a very different world.

None of this is to argue that ideology and politics are irrelevant to the predicament of men. They can certainly make matters better or worse (to take one example, overprescribing mind-altering medication can certainly make matters worse), but given the universality of male struggles in developed countries, it's hard to credibly argue that the outcome of the American culture war is dictating the present and futures of young men in the United States.

But if the frame through which you view the problem is primarily ideological, ignoring or minimizing the culture war isn't just wrong, it's diabolical. If you opt out of the daily online fights to focus on deeper, systemic change — if you become a "conscientious objector in the culture wars," to borrow a memorable phrase from Richard Reeves, the author of "Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It" — then you're leaving the field of battle when men need you the most.

Conversely, if your frame is primarily technological, economic and historical, then a focus on the culture war is a distraction. Fighting the culture comes at the expense of thinking systemically about how American institutions can support both men and women. You could purge the entire educational system of every radical left activist and you'd still face the same economy and the same technological realities.

One reason American politics are so dysfunctional is that we constantly overestimate what politicians can accomplish. Millions of Americans are looking to politicians and political parties to save men, to save the church, to end racism and to provide meaningful, enjoyable work. And when they can't accomplish the impossible, voters grow frustrated, declare that they're held back by a "uniparty" or a "regime" and then flirt with increasingly extreme and dangerous politicians and ideas.

In the midst of all this confusion and turmoil, we default to culture war in part because culture war is easy. A political party can win elections. You can build a vast audience by attacking your opponents online. And when you do win elections, you can wield power to punish your enemies.

But none of that changes the fundamental realities of an economic and technological environment that has permanently transformed the way we build a life and provide for our families. There is no political movement on the globe that can undo the seismic technological shifts that have remade our world.

If defeating liberals isn't the path to masculine flourishing, then what is? I do like many of the suggestions Reeves makes in his book. If boys' brains develop a bit more slowly than girls, perhaps we should try holding boys back a year from school, for example. If boys do need more male mentors, then we should try deliberately recruiting more men into the helping professions, especially teaching young children.

That's only a start. Reversing the decline of men will require a comprehensive institutional and individual response. Politics will matter, of course, but policy changes alone will never accomplish a task this immense.

We should definitely not treat male instincts and impulses as inherently "toxic," but celebrating traditional masculinity won't cure what ails men, either. As I noted above, many of the most traditionally masculine places in America struggle the most, and it's not because their towns or their schools or churches have become woke.

I appreciated the chance to talk with Jordan Peterson. I admire his desire to help struggling young men. But the culture war offers false hope. Angry and alienated young men could defeat all their ideological foes and still find that they don't have the jobs or relationships that can give them the meaning and purpose they so desperately crave.

From the comments



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I'm eager to hear from you. What do you believe is at the root of men's struggles? Are they facing an ideological challenge more than a technological or economic challenge? Do you have any solutions to offer?

Some other things I did

On Sunday, I wrote about one of the most important cases at the Supreme Court in its last term. The court, in a decision written by Justice Clarence Thomas, upheld a Texas law that requires age verification to visit pornographic websites. The case is directly relevant to the plight of men in America. It was the porn industry's first big setback in the Supreme Court in a generation; it has no one to blame but itself:

When the court's decision was announced, I saw an odd little surge online of what one might call porn nostalgia, as older people chuckled at the idea that pornography could be truly harmful.

But the world the chucklers grew up in was fundamentally different from the world we live in today. There is no comparison between a stack of Playboys underneath a friend's father's bed and the tidal wave of vile content online.

"In 2019," Thomas wrote, "Pornhub, one of the websites involved in this case, published 1.36 million hours — or over 150 years — of new content." But the problem extends well beyond the sheer volume of pornography. Citing my colleague Nick Kristof's vitally important 2020 report "The Children of Pornhub," Thomas explained that "many of these readily accessible videos portray men raping and physically assaulting women — a far cry from the still images that made up the bulk of online pornography in the 1990s."

It is a grotesque industry that produces content like this. An even worse industry makes it available to children.

The week before, I wrote about one of President Trump's most troubling nominations. He's selected a lawyer named Emil Bove to fill a vacancy on the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, which covers cases from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware and the Virgin Islands:

By now, Americans are accustomed to the devolution of Trump's team. Serious people populated the highest levels of the executive branch at the start of Trump's first term, but now some of the most important positions in American government are held by cranks like Kash Patel, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Pete Hegseth.

But as bad as those men are, their influence is ultimately limited — first by Trump himself, who feels completely free to overrule and disregard any decision they make for the sake of his own interests and whims, and second by time itself. Trump's political appointees won't be in American government for long, and while they can inflict lasting damage during their short tenures, the next president can replace them and at least start the process of repair.

Emil Bove, however, would be a problem for a very long time. At 44 years old, he's been nominated for a lifetime appointment to the federal bench. That means he'd long outlast Trump in the halls of American power, and if past performance is any measure of future results, we should prepare for a judge who would do what he deems necessary to accomplish his political objectives — law and morality be damned.

And here's the link for my hourlong conversation with Peterson.

David French is an Opinion columnist, writing about law, culture, religion and armed conflict. He is a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and a former constitutional litigator. His most recent book is "Divided We Fall: America's Secession Threat and How to Restore Our Nation." You can follow him on Threads (@davidfrenchjag).