

Only a 'macho man' makes it big in Trump's Washington

When Donald Trump talks tough, threatens allies, belittles women, mocks the disabled, denigrates minorities and “s-hole countries,” and boasts about his power and cognitive tests, is he demonstrating authentic manhood?

By **David McGrath** Jan 31, 2026, 7:00am EST



U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth (center), flanked by Secretary of State Marco Rubio (left) and President Donald Trump in December, announces the creation of the “Trump-class” battleship. Tasos Katopodis/Getty

I was sitting in the waiting room of the hospital reading the newspaper while my wife, Marianne, was having a routine outpatient procedure.

When a nurse finally came in to tell me the procedure was over and that we would soon be free to leave, she smiled and added, “Nice purse you have there.”

The purse was turquoise with dark blue, swirly images of palm trees, which was, I admit, appealing.

She, of course, was proffering a well-worn joke about a man and a purse, which, by custom in our country, is exclusive to women. It was Marianne's, and I didn't give a thought to holding it for her, a fact the nurse likely registered from my equanimous smile.

Commentary

I have no anxiety about manhood or how I am perceived based on superficial manifestations, whether it's a colorful purse or a pink suitcase, which I do happen to use since pink was the American Tourister selection discounted 40% on Amazon.

I also must confess to having taken pleasure, in my 20s, in upsetting stereotypes held by friends on the right about liberal, socially conscious English teachers, when I bested them in football and softball, and then afterward in the sports bar at arm wrestling.

I wasn't always so confident. At 16, I practiced wearing an intimidating scowl in the bedroom mirror, rolled up my sleeves to accentuate my budding biceps, and suffered frostbite rather than wear the mittens my mother bought me for Christmas.

If any of that seems familiar, it's similar to what Donald Trump, Pete Hegseth, Josh Hawley, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and other Republican males have been doing to burnish their MAGA credentials. Hegseth, in particular, has been criticized for sophomoric bravado, though his arrogance more often comes off as whining.

Hypermasculinity is all the rage

Of course, these are not 16-year-old boys insecure about their testosterone levels. Instead, this is an administration trying to compensate for mistakes and an absence of vision and of policy successes with appeals of hypermasculinity.

Can't come up with a health care plan, a peace deal for Ukraine, or a defense for endangering American troops by divulging classified information to your relatives? Let's do pushups on TV, announce plans to build the biggest warships in history, and blow up 35 boats in the Caribbean and Pacific that may or may not have been carrying drugs.

Can't fix rising prices at home or bury incriminating Epstein files? Instead, let's unleash swarms of armed, masked enforcers into American cities and launch a massive invasion of hapless Venezuela.

The GOP saw that the macho man appeal worked in getting [55% of male voters](#) to elect Trump over female candidate Kamala Harris in 2024, including double the percentage of Black males who voted for him in 2020, and 54% of Hispanic men.

But Trump's blatant bait and switch, promising peace and affordability on Day 1, but then goosing prices even higher with tariffs, and starting a needless war, is less likely to fool them twice.

When I became an adult, I learned that using common sense and being true to your principles are more important and less embarrassing than trying to mimic synthetic standards of manliness cooked up by Hollywood, Marvel Comics, or professional wrestling. I credit my perspective to my father, whose life-navigating ease I admired.

Charles McGrath Sr. was an accomplished and athletic Army captain during World War II. Later, when he became a father, he would not have been mistaken for a macho man with his "dad bod" and hobby jeans. But he impressed upon me and my brothers that respecting his wife and our mother, caring about other people, especially those less fortunate, and solving problems with listening and logic and compromise, instead of tough talk, intransigence and violence, were the gold standards of manhood and leadership.

Rather than preach those truths, he taught by example, one of which I wrote about in 2023, when he showed how intellect and empathy inspire more confidence than machismo and braggadocio.

So, when President Trump has talked tough, threatened allies, belittled women, mocked the disabled, denigrated minorities and "s- -hole countries," and boasted about his power and cognitive tests, was he demonstrating authentic manhood? Or

was he, instead, throwing up a smoke screen to occlude his broken promises, past and present failures, and future fears and insecurities?

I'd be less inclined to complain, were he not doing so at the expense of our country's soldiers and the American taxpayer.

David McGrath is an emeritus English professor at College of DuPage and author of "Far Enough Away," a collection of Chicago area stories.

<https://chicago.suntimes.com/other-views/2026/01/31/macho-man-donald-trump-mag-a-pete-hegseth-robert-kennedy-jr-washington-david-mcgrath>