



In The Self-Interest of Men

by Kathleen Carlin, Founding Executive Director

excerpt and introduction by Adam Horowitz

The following is an excerpt from a speech Kathleen Carlin, MSV's founding Executive Director, gave to our Development Council in 1995. Although it deals with the Oklahoma City bombing, we believe it speaks to the national debate about the source of teen violence. Noticeably absent in most of this discussion is the gender, economic class, and race of the perpetrators. Most of the pundits choose instead to focus on music, clothes, and video games as causal and or contributing factors. Whether it is a school shooting in Colorado, a murdered gay man in Wyoming, a bombed abortion clinic in Alabama or the destruction in Oklahoma City these are violent acts perpetrated by white men. While there is presently a call for white men to retake what has been "taken" from them - jobs, the government, the family - there needs to be an alternative message. Kathleen reminds us that it is men's work to counter these claims of entitlement and "talk to men about how in fact their self interest lies within a society where justice prevails."

The Oklahoma bombing has been something certainly in all of our minds. It put in front of me in a very direct way, as I thought about it, something that we've been hearing about for a while, and that is something that has actually become a category for public discussion, the category of angry white men. In thinking about this group, in relation to our work at MSV, which I do from time to time, I find myself thinking about what is the rage that is behind this category? What are they expressing? And what is the loss that they seem to perceive? Something that they believe is rightfully theirs, that they feel they are losing. We hear a lot about these men being squeezed out of the mainstream economically. But I don't really think that's an adequate explanation. It must be something more than that. What is, in fact, the ultimate source of this rage?

As I thought about this, in relation to the bombing, I thought of a television program I saw about twenty-five years ago actually, it was around the end of the Vietnam War. It was at a point when public scrutiny of the war was becoming more acceptable, because we were, at that point losing it, and people at that point were trying to understand what was going wrong . . . They interviewed, I remember, a young white man who described how intolerable the conditions there were for him. He characterized the environment there as dehumanizing in a number of ways. One, I remember, was that he talked about being ordered indifferently by his superiors to do what he considered the most debasing kinds of tasks, cleaning up after other people, having to clean the toilets and so on. And I can still see this, the camera closing in on him so that we could see his face, the humiliation in his face when, with a burst of feeling he said, "They make me feel like a maid."

Now this was presented without any comment, without any irony. There was nothing to suggest the woman hating and the racism in what he had said. It was served up as a justification that anybody would understand. What humiliation that he should be made to feel like a woman, and more specifically a woman of color. I think that this is the rage that men who believe it is their birthright to be served by, to be superior to and feel contempt for women and people of color. And what we've witnessed in Oklahoma, I think, is an example of the men who will stop at nothing to try to prevent the loss of that right.

When members of the group that is, by definition, the center (and here we know that's white men), feel the center not holding; when institutions don't just reflexively work in their favor; when, for example, schools and the workplace exercise affirmative action; when the courts begin to listen to and take

seriously crimes of male violence against women, we find these men reacting as though they have been backed into a corner and their very lives are threatened.

What the Oklahoma bombing has done for me is to bring me face to face with how deep the resistance is to real liberty for women, people of color and gays and lesbians. In its manifestation of opposing the government, the ATF, Federal Agents, this resistance looks like it's men fighting other men. After all [they're] the only worthy opponents. This battle among men is taking place on a field of women, people of color, gays and lesbians. The government, in this scenario, is code language for the rights of others, others who are supposed only to serve them and remain subordinate to men, to whites, to white men. The lines are being drawn.

And so it seems to me really crucial that the question be raised, where do men's interests lie? Is it in more and more oppression and repression, more control, more exaggerated hyper-masculinity that gains its force from the hatred of women and all others who are different? Or is it in making justice? Who is going to say that men's self interest lies in making justice? Where in the public discussion is this question going to get raised?

What each of you will be doing as you go out to build support for MSV is really to serve a much larger objective than simply to gain support for our organization. It's really to raise in the public consciousness the question "where do men's interests lie" and then from that place inside of you that has learned it in a very personal way, talk to men about how in fact their self interest lies within a society where justice prevails.