

Detailing the Abuse of Boys

By Stephen Goode

Feminists are up in arms over Christina Hoff Sommers' new book *The War on Boys*, which exposes how the consequences of radical feminism undermine the masculine nature of boys.

In 1994, Christina Hoff Sommers published her book *Who Stole Feminism?* and all hell broke loose. An unrelenting attack on the radical elements of the women's movement, the book earned Sommers, then a professor of philosophy at Clark University in Worcester, Mass., a very bad name among many feminists. But it won admiration from conservatives and such maverick culture critics as Camille Paglia, who declared, "I regard Christina Sommers as one of the most heroic truth-tellers of our time."

Now Sommers has brought out another controversial book, *The War on Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men*, which hardly was at bookstores this summer before it began "to spark a furious debate," in the words of Claudia Kalb, writing in *Newsweek*.

That debate continues to rage, particularly among the book reviewers who see Sommers either as spot on or profoundly wrong. The conservative *National Review* got it right, calling the book a major indictment of the antimale movement that has exerted enormous influence on America's schools and culture. But Sommers has been denounced by the liberal *Washington Post* for writing a "conservative polemic" and condemned by the *New York Times* because her tone is "argumentatively strained, [and] raised to a hectoring pitch."

Clearly, Sommers — now a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute — has touched a nerve. As a philosopher, her specialty is ethics, and it's her notion that what's been done to boys is morally wrong and needs to be righted. Her theme is summed up in the first sentence of her new book: "It's a bad time to be a boy in America." Why is it a bad time? Because, Sommers argues, radical feminism has spread far and wide the myth that it is girls



who are at risk in America, who are systematically discriminated against in favor of boys and who as a result don't do well in school and have bad images of themselves. It's actually the other way around, Sommers shows: It is America's boys who don't do well in school, who increasingly are suicidal in greater numbers than girls and who have difficulty finding a comfortable niche in society.

But feminist writers such as Carol Gilligan have been so successful in convincing the educational and cultural establishments that it's girls who need what help society can bring to

Under siege: Sommers' scholarship clearly illustrates the plight of boys.

bear, says Sommers, that boys have come under siege. They're told that being a boy isn't okay anymore, that it's downright wrong. Sommers shows that what radical feminism wants to do is "rescue" boys from their masculinity, thus setting the stage for the transformation of the "patriarchy" the feminists say oppresses all women into a feminist paradise where masculine swagger never intrudes.

Sommers likewise goes after male authors such as William Pollack,

whose books describe a crisis in masculinity among Americans that can only be relieved by teaching young men to express their feelings openly and abandon the stoicism and fear of self-expression they've mistakenly been taught are manly but which Pollack says are pathological.

Gilligan's and Pollack's books are widely read (Pollack's *Real Boys* stayed on the *New York Times*' best-seller list for six months after the Columbine High School massacre in Littleton, Colo.). But the best gauge of how deeply the war against boys has permeated our society is the Gender Equity in Education Act passed by Congress in 1993, which provided big doses of special aid to female students who were defined as an underserved population. And in 1997, the Department of Health and Human Services, or HHS, set in gear a program called "Girl Power!" to provide girls ages 9 through 14 with programs designed to help them make the most of themselves. As Sommers wryly notes, HHS does not have similar programs for boys.

It's not surprising that the liberal press has jumped on Sommers' books feet first. What's interesting is that so few of their often-contemptuous reviews so much as touch Sommers' arguments which after all the smoke and thunder stand as solid as ever.

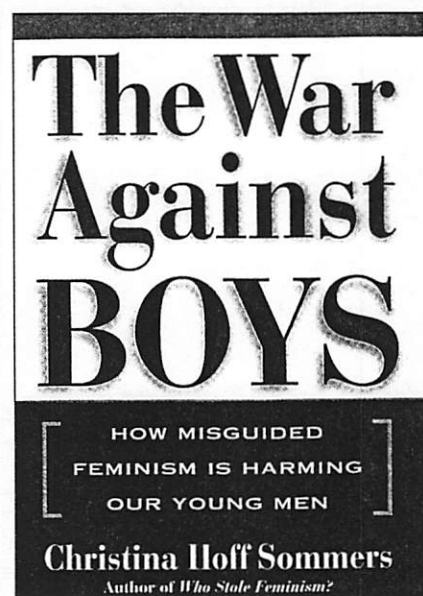
The *New York Times*, for example, had the prestigious child psychiatrist Robert Coles review *The War Against Boys*, but all Coles could come up with was a tsk-tsk in Sommers' direction for daring to question such widely respected writers as Gilligan and Pollack, both of whom teach at Harvard University, as does Coles. After all, writes Coles, Gilligan and Pollack are scholars "who have spent years trying to learn how young men and women grow to adulthood in the United States," as though that precluded them from criticism.

Not for one moment does Coles ponder whether the charges Sommers lodges against the two might carry any weight. He even gets testy with Sommers for criticizing writers who are "anecdotal and impressionistic" and who rely on "heavy doses of psychoanalytical theorizing," a point on which science assuredly agrees with Sommers but which Coles — who is, after all, a psychiatrist who makes use of psychoanalysis — finds distasteful.

But what's truly odd is that Coles ends the *Times* review with a "let us hope and pray" that the author of *The War Against Boys* learns more about how boys really are by listening to

Bruce Springsteen songs and reading such books about boyhood as novelist and short-story writer Tobias Wolff's autobiographical novel *This Boy's Life*. Springsteen's songs are pleasant enough and Wolff's book is a good read, but Coles seems to have missed how closely Sommers has watched her own sons' development and how effectively she sometimes weaves it into her text. She knows boys better than Coles allows.

But by far the most tendentious and fatuous of Sommers' reviewers to date has been E. Anthony Rotundo in the *Washington Post*. Rotundo teaches at Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., and is author of his own book on boys, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity From the Revolution to the Modern Era*.



"Examined carefully, Sommers' case does not hold up well," Rotundo maintains. What disturbs him most is that Sommers has what he calls a "boys-will-be-boys" notion of how boys should behave that's old-fashioned and needs to be abandoned because it fosters aggression and unnecessary competitiveness. Rotundo tut-tuts that when all is said and done there's really little and maybe no difference between boys and girls and that anyone who tries to foster a difference is doing both a disservice.

"Most studies in sex difference in various forms of behavior," he writes, "show no statistically significant difference" between boys and girls. "The studies that do find differences between the sexes tend to find much greater variation of behavior within each sex than between the averages of the two sexes."

For Rotundo, this proves "that we're far more commonly human than we are male or female." Well, yes, we are human. But we're male or female, too, and while certain statistics viewed in skewed ways may say there's no difference between the two, common sense (not to mention longtime practice and the observations of billions of parents over millennia) tells us something else, most would agree. So why abandon common sense in questions so basic?

It's sad that Rotundo admits that "boys do lag behind girls in reading and writing, and they do trail in extracurricular participation. They are both perpetrators and victims of violence more than girls are." But he concludes that Sommers' "intemperate book" provides no answers. "Had Sommers written a calm, factual presentation of boys' academic and social problems, this could have been a valuable book," Rotundo writes, at his most disingenuous. Not for a moment does he believe what he's writing, since calm or heated, Sommers' arguments remain the same and up to that point Rotundo has said repeatedly that he rejects what she has to say in toto. How could a change in Sommers' tone alter that rejection?

Sommers suggests that recent British experiments with boys-only schools, along with traditional drills and rote memorization that have improved the lot of boys, are a possible solution to the problems faced by boys in America. Here, too, the liberals balk. "Sommers' advocacy of gender-segregated schools seems a drastic leap backward," Elizabeth Johnson intones in *The Gazette* of Montreal. But one might ask: What's wrong with a leap of any kind that helps children?

Still, it's Sommers who may have the last word, with support coming from an expected source. This summer, the U.S. Department of Education issued *Trends in Educational Equity for Girls and Women*, a report that examines 44 indicators of academic equity between the sexes. About half showed no differences between boys and girls. Girls, for example, are as likely to use computers at home and at schools as boys.

The report says that boys do a little bit better in science and math. Girls, however, are the superior students overall and certainly when we consider literacy: Eighth-grade girls are comparable to 11th-grade boys when it comes to writing skills.

That's precisely what Sommers says the problem is. It's her critics who choose to ignore the consequences. •