

**THE NEXT AMERICAN:  
CHANGES IN ATTITUDE AND STYLE  
AMONG CONSUMERS, EMPLOYEES AND CITIZENS**

*The buffed body is losing its allure. Moving into pop culture after the social disorder of the early 1990s and becoming mainstream following the dot-com bust, the terrorist attacks of 2001 and mounting work pressures, the bulked-up body came to represent the positive attitude of individuals about their abilities to handle the increasing number and kinds of burdens being put on them – retirement planning, health insurance, extreme workloads.*

*Now individuals are losing that confidence. Male models on fashion runways have thinned considerably, and their diminution is the new symbol of how individuals see their abilities to carry the burdens being placed on them. The new, narrower body is a metaphor for an emerging set of values. Whereas individuals once thought they could “handle it all” alone, they now believe they need help – allies, movements, unions and groups that can bolster their strength.*

### **Bucks for Pecs**

The actor Matthew McConaughey seems to attract more boxoffice revenues the longer he exposes his torso to the camera. The young actor, known as much for his highly tuned gym body as for his acting performances, helped “Reign of Fire” (2002) draw \$15.6 million in business by revealing his pecs for 1.6 minutes. He then edged ticket sales to \$18.1 million for “Sahara” (2005) by baring his rippling abs for 1.8 minutes. In “Fool’s Gold” (2008), McConaughey broke free of upper-body costume restraints for a whopping 14.6 minutes, upping

that film’s revenues, in just the first two weeks of release, to \$31.6 million. (*Entertainment Weekly*, 2/22/08)

McConaughey’s run of six-packs-for-dough parallels the rise of gym-rat enthusiasm that captured the American mood in the years following the dot-com bust, the terrorist attacks of September 2001 and the increased pressure placed on employees to “beat the numbers” in a slow-growth recovery. Employees and consumers needed to strengthen their resolve, up their energy and push their capabilities to survive the new era of elevated risks.

The Atlas body became a metaphor for the strengthening of resolve, and the new, bulked-up body could be found in advertisements, movies and television shows, not to mention a wave of ads for body-building equipment appearing across the cable-channel spectrum. From superheroes to athletes, rippling muscles became a way to show stamina in the face of adversity.

Americans accepted such images of physical strength because those images “embodied” their own aspirations of the strength needed to limit the damage wreaked by an increasing number of troubles being thrown at them by contemporary life – problems such as paying more money for their own health insurance, working longer hours for less pay, responding to a flood of e-mails, managing their own retirement accounts, paying more for their children’s education, doling out more for property taxes, defending their homes against invasions from thieves and Internet pornographers and securing the necessary drug prescriptions to maintain a balanced mental state. As with McConaughey’s body bait, individuals were paying more and more, but unlike McConaughey’s box office, they were getting less and less for their efforts (see “So Unbelievably Male, Part I: Default Responses and the Return of Fear,” **IF 2719**, 8/3/06).

In shocking contradiction to the era of tough body types, the current message emanating from the fashion runways of America seems to be “I cannot handle this stuff by myself.” Casting for the recent New York shows turned sharply from the taut and toned men of the recent past and instead hired models like Stas Svetlichnyy, who stands 6 feet tall, weighs 148 pounds and sports a 28-inch waist. The standard runway model suit size has dropped from a men’s 50, popular in the 1990s, to a 38 now. “Beefcake” is making way for the “chicken chested.” “The idea of bulking up now seems retro,” explained one model/designer. “All the designers wanted,” noted a model casting agent, “was the scrawny kid who looked like he got sand kicked in his face.” “Skinny, skinny, skinny,” explained Dave Fothergill, director of the hottest agency in this transition, Red Model Management. “Everybody’s shrinking themselves.” In a similar vein, Kelly Cutrone, owner of a fashion branding and production house, notes, “No one wants a beautiful woman or a beautiful man anymore.” (*New York Times*, 2/7/08)

The perfect body with perfect features, at least as defined by past models, is now starting to be seen as an

unsustainable false front in the face of mounting challenges. The response to the spreading challenges pounding away at individuals’ stamina is different from the response that brought Matthew McConaughey good fortune. Unlike the “I can handle it” response of the muscle flexers, Americans, this time, are suggesting their bodies (and their minds) cannot handle it... alone.



## The Dangers of Going It Alone

According to those who knew him, Steven Kazmierczak, the graduate student who stepped from behind a curtain in a Northern Illinois University geology classroom and started pulling the trigger of his pump-action shotgun, killing five students before taking his own life, was an involved member of the learning community. “He was engaging, motivated, responsible,” as one of his professors later explained. How could he do these kinds of things, people who knew him wondered. (*Atlanta Journal & Constitution*, 2/16/08)

Some observers linked the shootings to those at Virginia Tech last year, but they could just as easily have made connections to several recent mass killings in shopping malls, retail stores, bus stops and grade schools, nearly all of which ended with a suicide.

◆ In the United States between 1999 and 2004, the suicide rate among those between 45 and 54 increased by nearly 20 percent, and it rose more than 13 percent among those between 55 and 64 years of age. For those

between 5 and 14, the number increased by nearly 17 percent. The only decreases occurred among those 65 and older. (*New York Times*, 2/19/08)

◆ Last year, 121 U.S. soldiers on active duty committed suicide, the highest annual number since the Army started counting such events, in 1980. Another 2,100 soldiers injured themselves trying to commit suicide, up from 350 in 2002. (*The Week*, 2/15/08)

Even as the bulked-up male image of an era of high-level security was filling pop-culture messages, reality was wreaking damage on more and more people. Unlike the “tough guys” of the first years of this century, more and more people have actually been finding it harder to keep going. The shooter at Northern Illinois had recently stopped taking his Prozac, one of several drugs intended to help people cope with the stresses of contemporary life. And now in a series of public revelations, we are learning that many of those bulked-up, age-defying bodies of sports stars and models were often products of steroid abuse. The whole “I can handle it” facade has recently been looking less and less, well, strong . . . much like the economy.

◆ Between 2000 and 2006, the U.S. economy lost 3 million manufacturing jobs to global markets. (*Christian Science Monitor*, 2/15/08)

◆ Between 2002 and 2006, Silicon Valley lost 50,000 middle-income jobs (\$30,000 to \$80,000), which have not returned – reducing the percent of middle-income jobs in the region from 52 to 46 percent. Meanwhile, the portion of jobs earning less than \$30,000 increased from 22 to 27 percent. (*New York Times*, 2/19/08)

◆ Chrysler announced a round of 10,000 layoffs, which is to be added to the already announced elimination of 30,000 jobs. General Motors said it would shed 48,000 workers. All “Big Three” car companies are trying to encourage more senior workers to retire in order to hire new workers, who, under the new contract, will earn less than half of what older workers earn. (*New York Times*, 1/29/08; *Financial Times*, 1/18/08)

Add to this list of long-term simmering concerns recent, acute problems, such as an imminent recession (the U.S. economy lost a net 17,000 jobs in January) and failing financial instruments that are worsening personal bankruptcies and foreclosures (both at modern-

day highs), and one thing becomes clear: effectively addressing contemporary problems as an individual is getting very difficult.



## Getting Together

The recent writers’ strike in Hollywood may be exemplary of what is just starting to surface in American society. Over the years, writers had been losing their power in the production system. Their salaries had declined, their residuals (*i.e.*, money paid for rebroadcasting their productions) had all but disappeared, and their creative control over what they had written was dwindling. Money that once went to writers who created a new situation comedy for television was going to pump up production and marketing costs. In addition, reality programming was severing the writers’ connection to studio production and the amount of on-air time available for scripted work. As one writer explained, “There’s a sense that the business as it was . . . is probably over.” (*Variety*, 2/11/08)

Individual writers were helpless to halt or even slow these huge shifts in the production model. Yet by group action, they shut down all productions, and as a result, an aggregate of creative types won a hard-line battle for a share of online revenues. The studios and networks – pressured by advertisers who did not want to fund reruns and were demanding repayment for the lack of audiences – did “a complete 180,” as one involved lawyer explained. As a result, the writers will

get residuals from Internet distribution. (*Entertainment Weekly*, 2/22/08)

The writers' strike revealed that even something as individualistic as writing can benefit from group action. From that point of view, the following interrelated items deserve close attention.

◆ In 2007, union membership increased by 311,000, the largest increase since 1983. (*New York Times*, 1/26/08)

◆ Last year, union membership among professional and technical health care workers increased by 10.4 percent. (*Modern Healthcare*, 2/4/08)



*"I sure hope the negotiations go well."*

### **A New Kind of Person/ A New Kind of Institution**

The "chicken chested" model stands as a metaphor for an emerging set of values, much as the "bulked up" body stood for the prior era's set of values. The new value set no longer holds power and force as necessary and sufficient, acknowledges vulnerability, looks to others for interdependent action and prefers solutions that start at the societal rather than the individual level. That means institutions may need to rethink how they operate.

◆ The U.S. Army has drafted a new operations manual that gives as much importance to societal stabilization and peace operations as it does to fighting and winning. "Army doctrine," the document states,

"now equally weights tasks dealing with the population – stability and civil support – with those related to offensive and defensive operations." (*New York Times*, 2/8/08)

Colonel H. R. McMaster, one of the manual's creators, has written that "self-delusion about the character of future conflict weakened U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq." The belief has been that winning the battle ended the battle—a concept that supported the era of the tough guy with the buffed body whose movie ends when he kills the adversary. "What we have found through the past seven years [in Iraq and Afghanistan]," notes Lt. General William B. Caldwell IV, another author of the new text, "is that is not the case." Other skills and other kinds of people are needed. McMaster explained that the institution that once advertised for "An Army of One" and bragged about victories in past battles "is finding it difficult to cut completely loose from years of wrongheaded thinking." Lt. General Caldwell said the plan was a "blueprint to operate over the next 10 to 15 years," but added that "it is going to take some time to inculcate that into our culture." (*New York Times*, 2/8/08)

One can imagine an enlightened executive, sensing the need to change the corporate culture away from the performance-pressured, gaming-favored, high-reward system that brought the current economy to its knees, agreeing with General Caldwell. The shift from "barrel chested" to "pencil chested" as a metaphor for individuals' capabilities – as well as for the sense of vulnerability, interdependence and shared responsibilities that such a shift entails – will take some time.



*"Excuse me, do you have a minute for someone other than yourself, you selfish bastard?"*

## A New Way

In mid-2006, we noticed a sudden burst of “maleness” across the media, what *Time* magazine called a “menaissance.” We noted that the media’s effort to bolster male bravado would not be successful in movies, on television and in advertising because society had moved past the talk of “bring it on” and “girlie men” insults. In our skeptical examination of this menaissance, we suggested that people were, in fact, looking to share their burdens rather than wander off on some personal display of power. The sense of vulnerability that comes with an increasing sense of risk, we observed then, has encouraged individuals to form

groups for shelter, both literally and figuratively (see “So Unbelievably Male, Part II: Sustainable Responses to the Return of Fear,” **IF 2720**, 8/3/06).

Joining communities for the purpose of sharing responsibilities and pushing joint actions is one attribute of the set of values that the Next American will prefer, ending loyalty to the individualistic, Atlas-as-metaphor era. Interdependence will come easier because the problems that society faces and that need attention cannot be addressed effectively by the individual alone. In short, the Next Americans will have a new way of acting, operating and thinking, and they will favor sympathetic and effective groups, unions and movements.