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## Creating Bodies, Creating a Nation: How the Idea of the Straight, White, Muscular Male Body Shaped America

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By Ketil Slagstad

### [Governing Bodies: American Politics and the Shaping of the Modern Physique](#)

[Rachel Louise Moran](#)

University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 224 pages.

1.

When Michelle Obama launched the “Let’s Move” campaign in 2010, it triggered a backlash by conservatives anxious about the so called “nanny state” interfering unduly in the private sphere. The campaign was a national initiative “[dedicated to solving the problem of obesity within a generation](#)” concurrent to the “Task Force on Childhood Obesity” founded by President Barack Obama. The task force sought to achieve the same goals by encouraging healthy school meals, improving food labels, and increasing physical activity for children. The campaign was heavily promoted in social media. Beyoncé, for instance, reworked her song “Get Me Bodied” into “Move Your Body” and released an accompanying work-out video. The video was a didactic attempt to make children and young people move. Accompanied by Beyoncé’s catchy rhythms, viewers were led through various dances, such as the clap and scoot, hot-floor step, “Beyoncé bounce,” and “wave the American flag.”

At the heart of this discussion lies the tense relationship between the intimate body and the American state. According to Rachel Louise Moran, this is not a new debate. In her new book, *Governing Bodies: American Politics and the Shaping of the Modern Physique*, she delivers a solid historical argument for this tension having played a central role in American politics throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She does not focus on body ideas or ideals in media, fashion, or advertising as her object of study. In her book, the historical object is the politicization of the body: how

physique, body shape, and body weight have been the subject of state policy from the First World War until the 1970s. One of Moran's main findings is that the political shaping of the American body has not primarily been mediated by compulsion or the use of repressive force. Quite the opposite – the US government has encouraged, organized, and carefully pushed the population's bodies in desired directions. These interventions are part of what she defines as the advisory state. She argues the state has exercised biopower in a subtle and efficient manner through the use of scientific and quantitative tools such as weight and weighing tables, growth charts and statistics, and by a voluntary approach – what Moran defines as “quiet methods.”

2.

Not all bodies have been equally important to the federal government, and not all bodies have been subject to the state's interventions the same way. The book's six chapters demonstrate that rather than targeting a real body, the interventions have conjured and kept alive a representation of an “ideal body,” which has often been white, straight, able, and male.

The book starts with the period just before, during and after the First World War. The Children's Bureau, which was founded in 1912, used nutrition science to decrease infant mortality and optimize kids' health. In a country with an increasing demand for labor force and military personnel, there was widespread anxiety that the population was physically unfit and unprepared for war. This anxiety was not only widespread – it was fostered by the government. On a poster from the 1918 Children's Year campaign, happy, healthy, white children were depicted marching together under the words “The health of the child is the power of the nation.”



The health of the child is the power of the nation. Photo: National Archives and Records Administration

Women were encouraged to weigh and measure children to produce sturdy soldiers in the service of the nation. This process produced what Moran defines as the idea of "scientific motherhood." Not only did it strengthen the bonds between women and the state, but it increasingly tied the idea of good motherhood and child health to scientific and quantifiable measures. In my view, this early 20<sup>th</sup> century history is an example of how the history of the body can be analyzed from a material perspective. Height-weight tables and growth curves are striking historical examples of how concrete objects, like technical aids, tools, and inventions have actively changed our understanding of the body and its ideals. The idea of good health was not merely an abstract, metaphysical one. The concrete measurements provided by height-weight tables and growth charts created a simplified quantifiable understanding of what good child health meant.

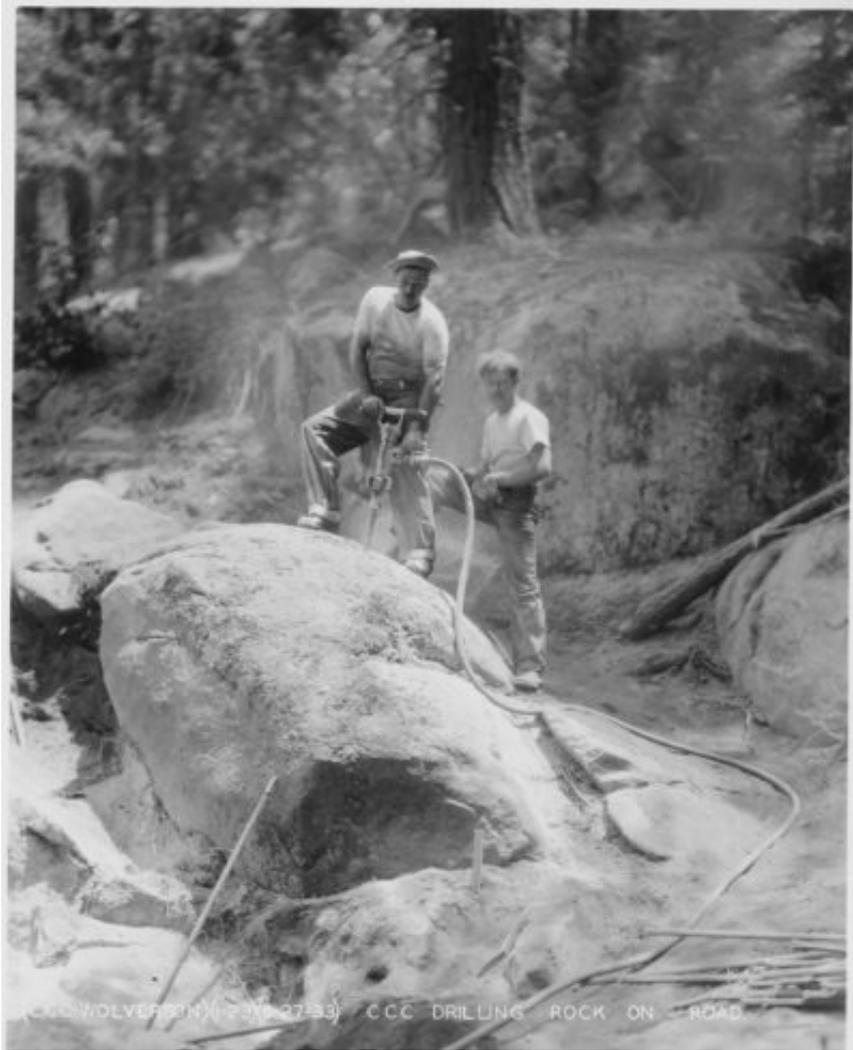
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During the Great Depression, the white, unemployed man became the target and instrument of the advisory state. Unemployment affected not only the jobless themselves. When a family father, in particular, had no income, it seemed a threat to the American nuclear family itself. As part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, young unemployed men

were enrolled in a comprehensive national tree-planting program to reforest land, maintain park trails, build roads, and prevent erosion and flooding. The Civilian Conservation Corps initially enrolled around 250,000 men who worked in camps where they received salary, shelter, and food. Even though the program explicitly stated that it would not discriminate based on race or color, Morgan writes that only about 10 percent of the total corps was black. In Mississippi, where more than 50 percent of the population was African American, only 2 percent of the enrolled men were black. In Georgia, black men were not enrolled until the federal Corps' administration intervened. The director of the Corps in Georgia argued that it was "vitally important that negroes remain in the counties for chopping cotton and planting other produce." (p. 42) The problem of unemployment posed a threat not only to men and their families, but to the nation itself. Robert Fechner, the program's first director, believed society and the nation's social fabric were endangered when young men drifted around without purpose. The program's rigorous routines, which included hard physical labor, as well as gymnastics and hearty foods, shaped the image of the white, heterosexual, muscular, able-bodied man. As James McEntee, the second director of the corps, wrote: "Much of the field work develops only certain muscles. The calisthenics, scientifically planned by Army experts in body development, are designed to give each muscle in the body proper exercise." (p. 50) However, it was the white male body that became the poster-boy for the program. Publicity photos depicting shirtless, muscular white men carrying bulky pipes or handling heavy sledgehammers were sent to newspapers and magazines. The pictures materialized the ideal of the breadwinning, masculine, independent man embodied as the white muscular body.



Civilian Conservation Corps, Husky Enrollee Wielding Sledgehammer at Camp Stratford in Baynesville, Virginia. Photo: National Archives and Records Administration



Civilian Conservation Corps in California, Camp Wolverton, Sequoia National Park. Photo: National Archives and Records Administration



Civilian Conservation Corps at an experimental farm in Beltsville, Maryland. Photo: National Archives and Records Administration

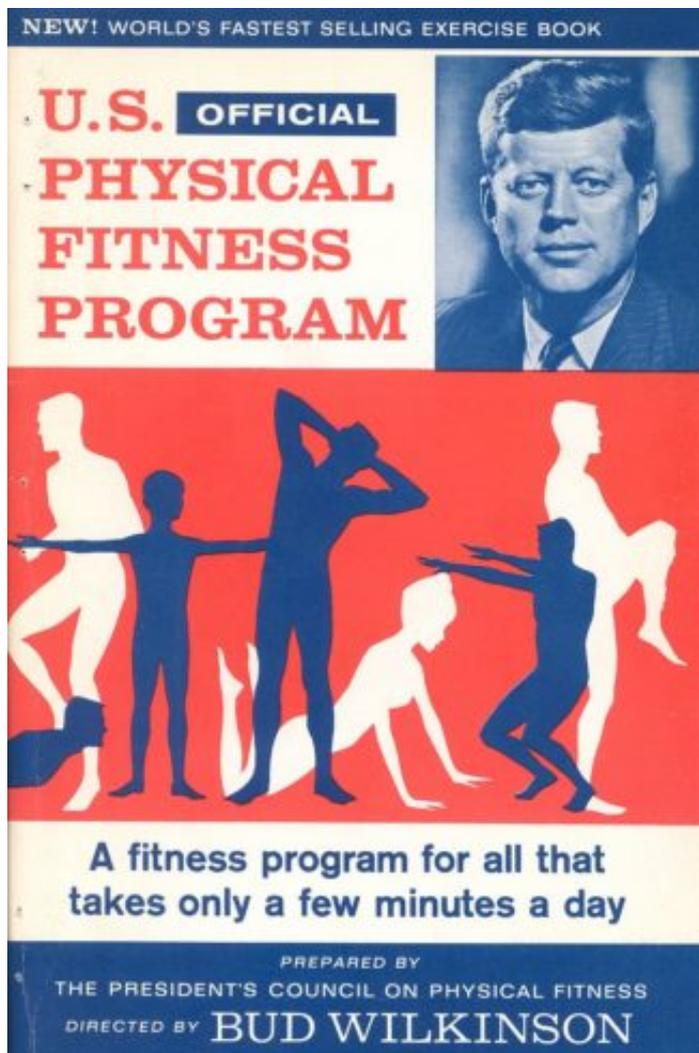
4.

The Second World War gave momentum to governmental intervention and a more active federal policy. On the behalf of the Selective Service, the agency responsible for the induction of soldiers, doctors estimated men's height and calculated their weight, took their pulse and measured blood pressure. Moran shows how, with the nation needing robust soldiers, the masculine ideal was molded to that of the strong heterosexual man. Physicians and psychologists were frontline fighters in a selection policy which resulted in men with broad hips, pubic fat, and patchy beards gradually being seen as examples of "failed masculinity" or, in worst cases, signs of homosexuality.

5.

After the Second World War and the ensuing decades of Cold War paranoia, with the accompanying fear of an intervening (communist) state, governmental interventions diminished in scope. Nevertheless, healthy labor was still in demand, again paving the way for the advisory state's

nudging politics, this time under the auspices of the President's Council on Youth Fitness, established by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956. In 1963, under President John F. Kennedy, the program changed its name to President's Council on Physical Fitness to include all Americans. In the magazine *Sports Illustrated*, Kennedy made clear what was at stake: "In a very real and immediate sense, our growing softness, our increasing lack of physical fitness, is a menace to our security." America, he argued, suffered from a "muscle gap." Campaigns for gymnastics exercises, including daily stationary marching, push-ups, toe touches, and voluntary physical fitness tests were promoted by celebrities. Moran shows how the goal was to unburden the nation of its soft, doughy physique and help it regain its ripped, muscular body. A remarkable poster from the council left little ambiguity: "The future belongs to the fit."



U.S. Physical Fitness Program Exercise Book's Front Cover, 1963. Photo: John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

In the post-war period, more and more women, especially white

middle-class women, entered the labor market. By 1960, Moran writes, 40 percent of women over the age of 16 had had a regular paid job. This led to increased interest in women's bodies by the federal government. Morgan argues that the state was no longer only interested in the female body for its reproductive capacities. Little by little, it came to focus on how to secure women's lifetime work capacity. What kind of female physique would serve the production needs of the country? How could women be kept in productive work as long as possible? The council's new attention to women's bodies was mirrored in its advertisements, including one poster from 1965 that stated: "Fit your daughter with a better-looking future ... A homemaker, a teacher, a nurse, a scientist, a secretary... they will all be happier, more efficient, and more successful if they are looking, feeling, and working their best. ... she'll do better at it if she remembers that the future belongs to the fit, and prepares for it."

6.

According to Moran, there was a widespread perception in the United States in the mid-1960s that nutritional deficiency was extinct, and that hunger belonged to low-income countries. Nonetheless, just a few years later, starvation and malnutrition in the United States were the most debated topics among nutritionists. What had happened? Lobby groups, like the Citizens' Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition put hunger on the agenda and highlighted the social causes of and solutions to malnutrition. In 1967, Senator Robert F. Kennedy traveled to Mississippi with media in tow, where he was photographed with emaciated black children. The bony black child body with a distended belly became a symbol of failed social policies. Liberals argued for expansive food programs. The Food Stamp Program, which was meant to increase nutrition levels in low-income households, was made permanent in 1964 under President Lyndon B. Johnson as part of his War on Poverty. Kennedy argued the program was not radical enough, but conservatives and Southern Democrats were skeptical, not least because it laid the groundwork for further social interventions that they believed could result in an expansive welfare state. For instance, Mississippi Governor Paul Johnson wrote that "nobody is starving in Mississippi. The nigra women I see are so fat they shine." As Moran writes, suspicion was thrown on African Americans in two ways: some believed the figure of the emaciated child did not exist and that the figure of the big black woman proved there was no shortage of food. Liberals and conservatives (including Southern Democrats) debated whether the wasted body existed. Even if they disagreed on advisory and interventionist measures, this kept body weight at the center of discussion. Body weight – whether too low or too high – was linked to individual choices and bad morals. Following Moran's

argument, the notion of body weight as a personal responsibility – with “over-weight” and “under-weight” as the two opposite materializations of irrational choices, moral weakness, and a lazy, docile character – were heavily entangled in, but also produced by the 1960s discussion of American hunger.

Meanwhile, structural causes such as poverty, social injustice, marginalization, and racism moved to the background. As a continuation of this development, the overweight body increasingly became the target of the advisory state’s policies in the 1970s, this time operationalized by the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), a food program established in 1972 aimed at pregnant and breastfeeding women and children. Women and their kids were encouraged to show up at regular weighing sessions in exchange for food vouchers for selected healthy foods. Several reports had established that obesity was now the biggest national nutritional problem, and increasing evidence had shown the effects of mother’s nutritional status on fetal health. Moran demonstrates that the idea of the overweight mother, often represented by the black female body, gradually “stuck” to the problem of low-birth weight infant. Prenatal and children’s health were increasingly seen as the result of mother’s (bad) choices. These associations also paved the way for the image of the irresponsible mother and the welfare queen. The impression was cemented in the training manuals for dieticians, which included sayings like “a moment on the lips, forever on the hips”, and “what you eat in private, shows in public.”

7.

Moran’s highly compelling analysis and meticulously researched book ends somewhat abruptly in the late 1970s. It would have been interesting to see her extend her analysis up to the present. Bodies and body ideals have been shaped by many other forces in society than the advisory state – advertising, popular culture, and now social media are obvious battlefields where bodies are negotiated and created. Having said that, I would postulate there is one field where the advisory state has continued playing a role: medicine. I would have loved to see Moran extend her analysis to the advisory state’s interest in the medicalized body from the post-war period until the present.

In 1957, the first results from the big cohort Framingham Heart Study were published. In the following decades, risks for future disease – among them hypertension, hypercholesterolemia, and life style factors in general – were identified. The concept of the risk factor was born (Aronowitz 2011). This change coincided with a number of new pharmaceuticals being

released on the market – for example, anti-hypertensive, anti-diabetic, and cholesterol-lowering drugs. This fundamentally changed doctors' role in preventing disease, but risk factors also redefined popular notions of health and the healthy body more generally (Greene 2007). The shift in thinking played out in negotiations between lobbyists and the state over therapeutic guidelines and over diet and lifestyle recommendations. The food-, sugar-, salt-, and meat industries have pushed for less federal regulation. The pharmaceutical industry, meanwhile, has fought for broader definitions of disease, which would create bigger populations to be targeted for treatment.

Moran's book shows the role the advisory state has played in shaping the American *physique* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century up until the 1970s. Although we now live in societies which seem obsessed with our habitus – body shapes and body weight – and which seem to idealize fitness, leanness, and muscularity, my hypothesis is that the advisory state has redirected its efforts towards the non-apparent, *interior characteristics* of our bodies, like blood-glucose and cholesterol levels and blood pressure. The pharmaceutical industry has played a defining role in this shift, and it would not have been so efficient in commodifying disease and changing the way we regard health and disease without other actors, like patient activists, doctors, and media. But the advisory state, with its organs like the Food and Drug Administration, has played a role too – for example, through the approval of drugs and the regulation of drug advertisement. Maybe this represents a gaze shift in how the advisory state has visualized and enacted the American body?

Instead of seeing the advisory state as one entity with a continuous history running through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I think this book successfully demonstrates that the advisory state should be viewed as an analytical framework. Used as an optic in historical analysis, the concept can make the entanglement between private and public relations, between people and the state, discernable. The 20<sup>th</sup> century's extreme societal changes demanded various governmental responses. It is hardly surprising that the body has been of interest and value to governmental planning and policymaking in this period. Most surprising, perhaps, is how subtly the U.S. state exercised its body politics. The state legitimized its use of power by measuring and weighing, counting and quantifying, and through the use of statistics and science.

The advisory state's interventions produced a certain type of body ethics which created and idealized some bodies and others not. Very often, deliberately or not, science legitimized racist, misogynist, and homophobic politics. In writing a history of the American body of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it might seem questionable to leave so little room for bodies of women, people with disabilities and people of color, and of those with differing

gender expressions and sexual orientations. The demographics of the United States is changing, and the current political situation in the country with polarization of the political debate could be seen as a result of a threatened white male supremacy. For this reason, *Governing Bodies* is a timely book. It is of paramount importance to understand what brought the country to this point, and why the idea and ideal of the white, straight, able-bodied man was born and kept alive in the first place.

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[Ketil Slagstad](#) is a medical doctor with research interest in the history of social medicine, the history of biomedicalization, and the history of HIV/AIDS.

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