Did *Father Know Best?* How Post-WWII Entertainment Media Shaped The Idealized American Family Through Consumerism and Patriotism

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Today's understanding of the American Dream, and in turn the all-American family, can be clearly traced back to the postwar era.[1] From manicured homes with white-picket fences to nightly formal family dinners made by happy homemakers, the idea of the White, all-American family penetrated all levels of society. American print and film media played a large role in creating the characteristics that were typically attributed to this idealized version of the nuclear family. As working and middle class families of the 1930s suffered through the Great Depression, gender roles and a woman's sense of purpose began to change.[2] Women began to join the workforce where they could, leading to the rise of dual income households. When World War II began, almost 30% of women were employed.[3] While this gave many women newfound independence, women entering the workforce was a means to an end. Upon the return of men from the war, women quickly became discouraged from working, their roles as mothers and housewives returning to the fold. These cultural shifts in gender roles reverted swiftly because of the belief that, "the path toward traditional domestic arrangements appeared to be the one most likely to bring Americans toward the secure homes they desired."[4] The gender dynamics of pre-depression America had returned.

The 1950s proved to be a period of unprecedented growth and stability for the American economy, American media encouraged women to marry young and start families fast. "By 1960, thirty-one million of the nation's forty-four million families owned their own home, 87 percent

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[1] Anna Diamond, "The Original Meanings of the 'American Dream' and 'America First' Were Starkly Different from How We Use Them Today," Smithsonian Magazine, October 1, 2018, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/behold-america-american-dream-slogan-book-sarah-churchwell-180970311/.
[2] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in The Cold War Era* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2017).
[3] Ibid., 51.
[4] Ibid., 57.

had a television, and 75 percent possessed a car."[5] This was a large shift from the 1940s, when multiple family homes as well as multi-generational families living in one home were at an all-time high.[6] Culturally, the belief that men were meant to be the sole breadwinners became a mainstay. Women's magazines ran articles encouraging women to return to the home and discouraged young women from pursuing higher education.[7] Radio stations, many of which had garnered a large female audience throughout the 1940s, began to adapt their programming for television, a fledgling form of media at the time. The pro-family messaging that dominated American media had paid off. "Americans consistently told pollsters that home and family were the wellsprings of their happiness and self-esteem…Less than 10 percent of Americans believed that an unmarried person could be happy."[8] Magazine, radio, and television media, a once seemingly innocuous form of escapism and entertainment, had quickly become something much more powerful. Americans held on tight to the values connected to these large economic strides. This paper seeks to answer the following questions: In what ways was White womanhood shaped and defined by media and advertising during the postwar era? How were motherhood and fatherhood portrayed differently in mainstream media? How did entertainment media create and uphold "White American family values"? How was political messaging encoded in family sitcoms? Through the analysis of entertainment media and advertisements, I will demonstrate how they worked tandem to establish the idealized, domestic, White American family in an effort to increase consumerist and anti-communist ideologies during the Cold War period.

Entertainment media's impact on family values can be traced to a pre-WWII world, in

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[5] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and The Nostalgia Trap* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2016), 25.
[6] Ibid., 6.
[7] Nancy A. Walker, *Women's Magazines, 1940-1960*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan New York, 1998).
[8] Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 25.

which American women had begun to find independence outside the household. Stephanie Coontz, historian and family studies scholar, discusses family dynamics and the economics of family life during the Cold War in her book, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. Her work focused on the efforts made to conform to American standards of womanhood and family life through consumerism. Covering similar topics, historian Elaine Tyler May's research was focused on family life and female identity throughout the Cold War Era, beginning with how the Great Depression and WWII impacted gender roles in marriage. According to May there was an unprecedented amount of pressure put on young people, especially women, to get married during one of the most "uncertain times" in American history, much of which came from magazines and television. Joanne Meyerowitz and Nancy Walker, two gender historians, offer an overview of the impact that women's magazines had on gender roles and beauty standards throughout the post-WWII era.[9] Elana Levine and Lynn Spigel, two prominent television and gender historians, delve into the impact that radio and television had on each other as well as in the physical home. Levine focuses on the connection between radio and television and how soap operas helped usher radio serial audiences to daytime television.[10] Spigel's research looks at the effect that radio and TV had on women's work in the home and how this consideration changed the entertainment industry.[11] Finally, looking at the history of the sitcom, Erin Lee Mock and Saul Austerlitz, two media historians, unpack the effects of family sitcom television on American families. Both Mock and Austerlitz center their work around shows like *Father Knows Best* (1949-1954 on radio and 1954-1960 on TV) and *Leave It to*

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[9] Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946- 1958," *The Journal of American History 79,* no. 4 (Oxford University Press, 1993): 1455–82; and Nancy A. Walker, S*haping Our Mothers' World: American Women's Magazines*, (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2000).
[10] Elana Levine, *Her Stories: Daytime Soap Opera & US Television History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).
[11] Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010).

Beaver (1957-1963 on TV). Mock's work is of importance for understanding how the representation of fatherhood in sitcom television played a large part in family gender dynamics, and Austerlitz focuses on "American life as it wanted to be" and how that was demonstrated through sitcom television.[12] This paper will build on the work of these gender and media historians and investigate how entertainment media created and upheld expectations for women and families in postwar America through consumerism, patriotism, and gender roles.

Gender Roles and Womanhood

Standards for women were conveyed to girls from a very young age. After the end of WWII, magazines were a main source of powerful messaging about the roles that girls and women were expected to fill, especially that of the mother or housewife. Articles in White women's magazines like *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies' Home Journal* often suggested that the kind of woman who was "good" or "successful" was a doting mother and a diligent housewife.[13] These magazines had an aspirational quality to them and portrayed the idea that a desirable life was attainable through consumerism. Much of the messaging in these magazines focused on shaping women into the ideal housewife and mother: Someone who cared for their children and did not wish to pursue higher education or a career outside of the home.[14]

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[12] Erin Lee Mock, "The Horror of 'Honey, I'm Home!': The Perils of Postwar Family Love in the Domestic Sitcom," *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 41, no. 2 (2011): 29–50; and Saul Austerlitz, "Leave It to Beaver," chapter, in *Sitcom: A History in 24 Episodes from I Love Lucy to Community* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 53–65.

[13] Walker, S*haping Our Mothers' World*, 48.

[14] *Jet Magazine*, a Black women's magazine, offered a starkly different, though still aspirational, take on a Black woman's role in society. "Married Women in College," a *Jet* article from 1956, discussed the success of married women in college compared to their unmarried counterparts. According to the author, married women were more mature and more involved in student leadership because of their experiences as homemakers. Further, the interviewees claimed that married women were more driven and less likely to drop out, compared to their single counterparts. "Due to the responsibilities of marriage, these women adjust easier, apply themselves more…" (pp. 29) A key aspect of this article is that it was not discouraging women from going to college. Instead, it encouraged married women to attend college, and single women in college to get married. This comes as a stark contrast to articles written in White women's magazines. Although *Jet* is important to the conversation of women's magazines

Magazines heavily encouraged women to marry young, to have children early, and to learn how to be a "good" wife. The approach taken by most media was to guilt women into motherhood. One of the most overt examples of this was "Are You Too Educated to Be a Mother?", an op-ed from a June 1946 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal*. The piece discussed the morality of not having children as a college educated woman.[15] The article presented evidence about the lack of college educated women who were having children and in turn how this would hurt the future of the America. The article invoked fear in readers, citing delaying pregnancy until after college as a cause of a low US birth rate of children that were bound for "success:" "At the present rates of reproduction, within three generations the woman with a bachelor's degree will have one grandchild. Her contemporary with less than a grammar-school diploma will have *nine* grandchildren."[16] The author cited multiple reasons for these statistics, like the high cost of living and access to birth control. Even with these in mind, the author still argued that the best solution was for college educated women to become mothers. This further set a hierarchy of standards for motherhood; having children did not exempt mothers from harsh expectations. If anything, motherhood only amplified the standards in which women were held to. To this author, nine children of "uneducated" parentage was outrageous and irresponsible. This article perpetuated the idea that motherhood was synonymous with success.

"Are You Too Educated to Be a Mother?" was not a stand-alone piece about motherhood. *Good Housekeeping* ran an article titled "Why I Quit Working" in 1951 which argued that women should leave the workforce to focus on motherhood and *Ladies' Home Journal* published

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during the postwar era, the focus of this paper does not offer space to discuss the nuances of race in magazine messaging, as this paper is an investigation about the "White, idealized American family."

[15] "Are You Too Educated to Be a Mother?", *Ladies' Home Journal*, June, 1946, 6, as cited in Nancy A. Walker, *Women's Magazines, 1940-1960*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan New York, 1998), 114.

[16] Ibid., 6.

"You Can't Have a Career and Be a Good Wife" in 1944 which explained that marriages where both partners worked, were doomed.[17] These articles exhibit the recurrent theme that women should prioritize homemaking and motherhood. Although the argument can be made that articles like "Are You Too Educated" can be read as encouragement for women to go to college, it more accurately conveyed the notion that women had an obligation to their country to produce intelligent offspring. It was never about college; it was about forcing women into motherhood.

Even magazines that purported to lift women up continued to define a "good" woman based on her appearances and role in society. In her article, Joanne Meyerowitz examines this phenomenon. Despite the publication of articles that uplifted successful women, rather than imposing domestic stereotypes on readers, Meyerowitz found that gender roles were still starkly enforced. In these magazines, she found that women were spoken about, "as pretty, motherly, shapely, happily married, petite, charming, or soft voiced," and that the "emphasis on femininity and domesticity…seems to have cloaked a submerged fear of lesbian, mannish, or man-hating women."[18] The "lesbians" or "man-hating women" who Meyerowitz references posed a threat to the idealized, White, nuclear family, one that consisted of a mother, a father and their children.

Magazines were not the only form of media disseminating these beliefs. Radio stations, and later television channels, were often owned or sponsored by large corporations who were in control of advertising.[19] This meant that no matter what form of media was present in the home, the same standards were still being circulated. Radio serials were the leading form of daytime storytelling that was targeted specifically at women.

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[17] Jennifer Colton, "Why I Quit Working" *Good Housekeeping*, September 1951, as cited in Nancy A. Walker, *Women's Magazines, 1940-1960*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan New York, 1998), 82; and "You Can't Have a Career and Be a Good Wife" from *Ladies' Home Journal*, January, 1944, as cited in Nancy A. Walker, *Women's Magazines, 1940-1960*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan New York, 1998), 71.
[18] Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique," 1460.
[19] Levine, *Her Stories*, 32.

> The idea that female spectators were also workers in the home was, by the postwar period, a truism for broadcasting and advertising executives. For some twenty years, radio programmers had grappled with ways to address a group of spectators whose attention wasn't focused primarily on the medium (as in the cinema), but instead moved constantly between radio entertainment and a host of daily chores.[20]

Because men were working outside the home, women were able to be reliable daytime listeners as their jobs in the home and with their families kept them near their radio.[21] These radio serials often starred female protagonists, and were seen as "low brow," due to their dramatic storylines, like how soap operas are seen today. In fact, television soap operas were adapted from radio serials of this era.

Portia Faces Life was a prominent radio serial that aired from 1940 to 1953 and was later adapted for television, lasting one season from 1954-1955.[22] *Portia* followed a widow who had to juggle her duties as a mother, housewife, and attorney all while investigating the murder of her husband.[23] Much like how magazines displayed an aspirational form of womanhood, television needed to portray a woman that housewives could relate to on one level, while at the same time providing something to strive for. Further, soaps needed a specific level of watchability that would allow women working in the home to continue their tasks, but still stay entertained by the story unfolding before them.[24] "In fashioning daytime shows on familiar models of the popular press, television executives and advertisers were guided by the implicit assumption that the female audience had much in common with the typical magazine reader."[25] Portia, both the character and show, had the aspirational qualities that magazines of this age did. She was not only a mother, but self-sufficient, single woman with a job. While women were certainly enticed

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[20] Spigel, *Make Room For TV*, 75.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Jenni Matz, "Frances Reid Interview," *Television Academy Foundation*, (Television Academy Foundation, May 17, 2018). 0:00-2:23.
[23] Levine, *Her Stories*, 19.
[24] Ibid., 23.
[25] Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 82.

by "being able to *see* her manage home and family as well as a career," giving viewers "a compelling reason to turn on the TV midafternoon, ironing board or not,"[26] *Portia* never truly became a successful TV adaptation.[27] This decline in success can be attributed to the fact that *Portia* showcased a reality that was no longer relatable to viewers in 1954, one in which women could both be mothers and have careers. Although *Portia* provided viewers with a career and life to strive for, she was unable to create overarching relatability to her audiences. Her aspirational qualities went beyond the white picket fences, displaying a life that was out of the question, one of romantic, emotional, and financial independence.

Although daytime radio had loyal listeners, televisions began to threaten radio's success. Over the span of ten years, television ownership increased from 5% of households to 98%. During the same period, radio ownership decreased from 94.6% of homes to 90%.[28] Even though radios were in almost every home, TVs were now their direct competitors. Studio executives and advertisers understood that using plots and characters that audiences were already familiar with would increase their success on television.[29] *Portia Faces Life* was not the only radio program that ushered in a new era of entertainment. In fact, most early sitcoms were adaptations of radio serials from the 1940s. The mid-1950s marked the period in which sitcoms truly began to take off, and those that rose to fame were, for the most part, family sitcoms. Most notably was *Father Knows Best*, a situational comedy that followed the Andersons, a classic, all-American, nuclear family. Claiming the number 6 spot on the Nielsen Rating Scale during its final season on

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[26] Levine, *Her Stories*, 20.
[27] Ibid., 19; and Matz, "Reid Interview," 0:00-2:23.
[28] John Condry and Douglas Keith, "Educational and Recreational Uses of Computer Technology," *Youth & Society* 15, no. 1 (1983): 87–112; and "Inside Story: Radios In More U.S. Homes Now Than In the 1950s.," Inside Radio, July 18, 2016, https://www.insideradio.com/inside-story-radios-in-more-u-s-homes-now-than-in-the-1950s/article_8ed0712c-4cb5-11e6-a8c7-b3e12d86c826.html.
[29] Marsha Francis Cassidy, "Daytime Television in the Era of the Feminine Mystique, 1948-1960," essay, in *What Women Watched: Daytime Television in the 1950s* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2005), 1–26, at 9. Project Muse.

television, the show's popularity peaked with 13,587,750 viewers.[30] Although these shows were no longer just a listening medium, the focus was never truly on the medium but rather on the message.[31] *Father Knows Best* was family focused, and touted "American values," each episode typically having an overarching lesson about morals or values that was usually imparted onto the Anderson children, Betty, Bud, and Kathy, by their parents, Margaret and Jim.

In the sixth television season of *Father Knows Best*'s, an episode titled "Kathy Becomes a Girl" explores Kathy's place in society as she grows into her identity as a teenage girl. Much like Meyerowitz's analysis of how magazines emphasized femininity out of a fear of "lesbians" or "mannishness," sitcom television did the same. Print and screen media encouraged girls to be dainty, well mannered, and, well, "girly." In the episode, Kathy opens up about how she feels left out by other girls, particularly her friend Patty, and rather than encourage Kathy, her family criticizes her boyish tendencies and tomboy-like way of carrying herself. The episode opens with Kathy wrestling her friend Errol, who is a boy. He displays confusion at her attitude as does Margaret, her mother, when she enters, telling Kathy it is time for her to get ready for supper. Margaret questions if she is getting too old to be "wrestling boys and playing football," to which Kathy responds, "What else is there to do?" Margaret replies, "Well, you could invite a few girls over once in a while."[32] This demonstrates a sense of otherness that Kathy experiences throughout the series. Instead of assuring her daughter that girls could be friends with boys or encouraging her to participate in activities that bring her joy, like wrestling or football, Margaret continues to explain to Kathy how to fix her problems by changing herself entirely.

KATHY. What am I, an oddball or something?

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[30] "TV Ratings: 1950s," Classictvguide.com, accessed October 19, 2023, https://classictvguide.com/tvratings/1959.htm.
[31] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1964).
[32] *Father Knows Best*, season 6, episode 9, "Kathy Becomes a Girl," written by John Elliotte and Ed James, aired November 30, 1959, on CBS. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42J5iGL9Tmg. 0:25-1:52.

MARGARET. Well, there comes a time when girls like girls who act more, well, more like girls.

KATHY. You mean, I should act the way they do, and be a stuffed shirt?

MARGARET. No! Just be a normal average girl.

KATHY. I don't think I'm the type.[33]

This interaction between Kathy and her mother displays the desire to fit in that so many girls were striving for from a young age. Margaret's mention of a "normal average girl" emphasizes the mold that girls were meant to fit into, even from such a young age. Similar to women's magazines of the postwar era, which emphasized the aspirational "good" woman, Kathy was faced with trying to fit herself into that ideal. The end of the scene shows Patty and Kathy discussing a party that Patty left her out of, as Kathy earnestly tries to mend their friendship. "You see," she says to her mother and sister, "I tried to be friendly."[34] This line emphasizes Kathy's own internal struggle with her place in society, particularly amongst girls her own age.

As the episode continues, it is clear that her feelings of being different, or feeling out of place, have been brewing in Kathy for a long time. In the next scene, the Anderson's discuss Kathy's problems when they believe she is out of earshot. Jim, ever the voice of reason for the Anderson's says: "Now wait a minute, this is no joking matter…We've got to find the solution" to which Betty replies, "I've got the solution. She should have been a boy." Kathy hears Betty's insensitive retort and runs into the living room crying, "I wish I were a boy! I'm just a nothing, and everybody sits around criticizing and feeling sorry for me…I'm a misfit and everybody hates me."[35] Kathy has made herself loud and clear. The problem is not a lack of understanding about female friendships, like Margaret suggests when she explains that girls want to be friends with girls who behave "more like girls." Instead, the problem is that her expression of her gender

[33] Elliotte and James, *Kathy Becomes a Girl*, 2:13-2:37.
[34] Ibid., 3:37-3:45.
[35] Ibid., 5:12-5:25.

identity does not live up to the standards being set for and followed by the girls and women in her life, like Betty and Margaret's relationships with men, how they dress, and their "feminine" way of carrying themselves. The standards Kathy feels she does not live up to, were the same standards being upheld and promoted by the very show in which her character is having this crisis. At one point Kathy asks if she can speak to her father "man to man" to which Jim asks why they cannot speak "girl to man." Kathy hits back, "Why is everyone hammering at me about being a girl?"[36] Kathy's frustration with being confined to a singular expression of girlhood illustrates her deeper resentment towards the standards that were set for her, not girlhood itself.

The episode concludes with the Andersons throwing a party for Kathy where they invite only boys over.[37] After speaking with her father, where he convinces Kathy that men like women who are "dependent" or "a little helpless," Kathy pretends to sprain her ankle so the boys fawn over her. This moment is far bigger than Kathy's relationship with boys, as it displays a much larger point of contention for American men, the threat of powerful women. The qualities that Jim emphasizes, "dependent" and "helpless," demonstrate that men desire the feeling of being needed. Women were forced out of the workforce and placed into the home for this very reason: Men felt threatened by the independence women gained when they were in the workforce.

This episode is one among many in the series that expertly displays larger American values, such as marital submission and ideal girlhood, through encoded lines and actions. One value in question was that women were meant to submit to men, letting them take charge in private and public spheres. It also demonstrates the value of girlhood and the lengths to which her family went to ensure that Kathy was living up to those standards. Instead of trying to make her feel more heard and accepted for the things that made her different, the Andersons quickly

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[36] Elliotte and James, *Kathy Becomes a Girl*, 17:42-1753.
[37] Ibid., 21:48-22:06.

worked to make her "fit in" with what they believed was "normal" or "right." If the Anderson family was not one of prominence in American media, how they dealt with Kathy's ostracization would not have held as much weight. However, by the time this episode aired, *Father Knows Best* was in their sixth season. Its dominance had been established, receiving positive reception from audiences. The Anderson's wielded lots of social and political capital. Therefore, their reaction to having a child that was "different," would influence how real families across America would handle their children that were like Kathy. This episode proved that the Andersons' issues with Kathy had stemmed from her gender identity. Kathy's failure to uphold the standards set forth for girls and women reflected poorly on the Anderson. Therefore, they continued to confine her into one ilk of girlhood, to show the American people there was a right way, and a wrong way, to exist as women in American society.

American Family Values

In the next decade, the expectations for women, particularly mothers, to meet certain standards, like being attentive but not overbearing or beautiful but not revealing, intensified. *Leave It to Beaver* was a family sitcom that premiered in 1957, spanning 234 episodes, first on CBS and then on ABC.[38] Like *Father Knows Best*, Austerlitz explains that *Leave It to Beaver* and its various sitcom contemporaries were presenting a "carefully pruned version of American life—white, suburban, middle class, patriarchal, vaguely Protestant—as universal."[39] *Beaver*'s likeness to *Father Knows Best* is often due to the traditional family roles that the show promoted. June Cleaver, the mother of Beaver and Wally and wife to Ward, embodied the all-American housewife that was so heavily promoted throughout the postwar era. In a season three episode,

[38] Austerlitz, "Leave It to Beaver," 53.
[39] Ibid.

titled "Mother's Day Composition," Beaver tries to learn about his mother's life before marriage. The episode frames a woman's life in two sections: before marriage and after marriage.

In the beginning of the episode, Larry, Beaver's best friend, suggests that the class do a composition for Mother's Day: "Mother's Day is soon, and we could write about our mothers. How we love em and pray for em…How they fix our lunch, and they wash our dirty clothes and everything."[40] The description of mothers that Larry supplies the class with is reminiscent of the stereotypes that were forced on to women, particularly mothers, during this time. "Fixing lunch" and doing the laundry are exactly the kinds of outdated and sexist chores that in today's context seem like an antiquated example of a mother's role. But as Larry innocently suggests, that was what mothers of this era did and that is why they were so fondly loved. The teacher decides that the assignment be about mother's lives before they took on that role: "Suppose we write about our mothers as they were before they were married. Well, I'm sure that you have mother's with very interesting backgrounds and careers."[41] This asserts the belief that women's lives were strictly within the home after marriage. Instead of having flourishing lives in addition to having children, women were expected to simply pause their own lives to tend to their husbands and kids. The careers and schooling women may have done before having kids was just that, a life before children. As motherhood was the ideal outcome for American women, their other lives had to end when they had children. June Cleaver reinforced this belief: Motherhood was an identity that had to be assumed, the past versions of her left behind.

Beaver goes to Wally for help with learning about his mom but all he can think of is that she was a girl. "Yeah, but what did she do?" Beaver asks. Wally replies, "Well I guess she just

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[40] *Leave It to Beaver*, season 3, episode 31, "Mother's Day Composition," written by Joe Connelly, Bob Mosher, and Bob Ross, aired April 30, 1960, on ABC. https://www.peacocktv.com/watch/asset/tv/leave-it-to-beaver/8888832141670124112.
[41] Ibid., 3:23-3:51.

waited around for dad to come and marry her."[42] Beaver soon realizes he has no idea what his mother did before he was born and grows jealous of kids whose mothers had "exciting lives." He decides to lie about his mother's life before marriage and gets into trouble with the school for it. His lies make June seem like a bad, irresponsible mother to his classmates, but Beaver lies in the first place because he thinks his classmates will think her life was too "boring." This exemplifies the juxtaposition of standards mothers were meant to meet.

The episode does not just revolve around Beaver's own discovery about June, but it follows Ward stepping into typical mother roles as well. He attempts to cook dinner using a dish scrubber as a pastry brush and eventually burns everything in the oven. There is even a poignant moment when he offers to do the dishes for June, because Beaver needs to speak with her. As she leaves, June warns him about the heat of the water.

> JUNE. Well, alright, come on here you finish these. Watch out, that water is hot.
> WARD. Ah June, I have done hundreds of dishes since we were married.[43]

Ward immediately dunks his hands in the boiling water and cries out in pain. Like the lack of understanding about who June was before she met Ward, this aside shows how little the Cleaver's take June seriously. Although they only equate her with her caregiving and ability to serve her family, there is still a lack of faith in the fact that she knows what she is doing. Ward considers dishwashing to be easy, and yet hurts himself immediately. In a classic display of weaponized incompetence, Ward attempts to perform June's tasks and fails, showing that only "she would be able to do it properly" and therefore trapping her in her role as the homemaker.[44]

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[42] Connelly et al., "Mother's Day Composition," 5:26-6:03.
[43] Ibid., 6:19-6:27.
[44] Weaponized Incompetence is the feigning of misunderstanding how to complete simple tasks and/or doing them poorly in the hope that someone else, typically women, will either do it themselves or not ask in the future. Although it is a newer term, it is a phenomenon that has spanned centuries and is very apparent in sitcom television; Brittany Wong, "'Weaponized Incompetence' Screws Women Over at Work and in Relationships," HuffPost, January 27, 2022, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/weaponized-incompetence-women_l_61e71983e4b0d8b665717814.

June's entire world is her home and her children, and yet, she is still not trusted to do the things she does every day. Ward does not do the dishes to lighten her cognitive load, or because he wants to help her, rather he does the dishes in this instance because their children need June.[45] As June is the reliable and omnipresent parent, she must put her tasks aside to assist her children. While Ward does take on her tasks throughout the episode, he does each one worse than the next, leaving June to not only clean up after his mistakes, but do all the tasks over again, like when Ward burns the dinner.[46] This is the trap that women of this era were constantly stuck in. While women, particularly mothers, were expected to prioritize motherhood and homemaking as their jobs, they were simultaneously criticized for their performance of those roles and told it was something anyone could do, even their husbands.

At the end of the episode, June and Ward explain to Beaver why lying was wrong, and in true sitcom fashion, the conflict gets resolved. While honesty may have been the intended value for viewers to glean from the episode, both in Beaver's school project and in Ward's homemaking abilities, what the viewers really learn is how women were expected to behave through June's storyline. She married young, did not have a career, save for her five-day stint in retail, and devoted her life to homemaking and motherhood.[47] This episode, and shows like *Leave It To Beaver* generally, foster the belief that women were bound for motherhood, that their lives should be devoted solely to their children. Further, even Beaver's reaction to his mother not really having much of an exciting life before having kids, alludes to these high standards that had

[45] Sociologist Allison Daminger defines "cognitive load" as "the mental work and worry that goes unseen." Most often women are burdened by "cognitive load," as they tend to do almost twice the amount of housework than men do. In this example, June's mental load is ascribed to washing the dishes and beginning dinner but is disrupted by Beaver's questions and assignment. Ward, in an effort to be helpful, asks what he can do which only adds to June's cognitive load as she now must worry about Ward's effectiveness in helping her in addition to helping Beaver; Mac Daniel, "The Unseen Inequity of Cognitive Labor," Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, June 21, 2022, https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/news-and-ideas/the-unseen-inequity-of-cognitive-labor.
[46] Connelly et al., "Mother's Day Composition," 22:00-22:18.
[47] Ibid., 6:57-7:20.

been set for mothers. Like "Are You Too Educated to Be a Mother?" demonstrates, the existence of double standards for women was commonplace. Going to college was discouraged but so was being uneducated and having too many children. For June, if she had too exciting of a life, she would be seen as a bad mother, which does happen when Beaver lies about her life. However, having a boring life left Beaver disappointed. June was the ideal woman, validating what Jim told Kathy in *Father Knows Best*: men desired women whose world revolved around their husbands and families. This episode illustrates the incredibly high standards that were expected of women throughout this period and how it was portrayed on TV.

The Cleavers were not the only family that displayed this unequal treatment of mother and father. As one of the leading adaptations from radio, *Father Knows Best* expertly painted the picture of how America saw itself during this time, or rather, how it wanted to be seen. A 1950 episode, titled "Picnic for Father's Day," follows the Anderson family trying to put together a Father's Day celebration that gets disrupted by Jim's previously made plans to go fishing. To make a compromise, the Anderson's go fishing with Jim and his friend Hector, chaos ensues, and Father's Day is "ruined."[48] Although the episode is meant to be about Jim, it is far more revealing of Margaret and how she is treated by both her children and her husband.

In Margaret's attempts to plan a day for Jim, she is met with pushback from her children. She explains, "Kathy, we're going to devote the entire day to your father...Because your father is one of the sweetest men in the entire world."[49] This kind of language was used in the absence of Jim, a truth that Margaret wanted to implore on her children. An argument between Margaret and her children ensues, Margaret having to explain why merely buying a gift was not a suitable

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[48] *Father Knows Best*, episode 43, "Picnic for Father's Day," written by Ed James, aired June 15, 1950, on NBC. https://archive.org/details/father-knows-best-1949-12-29-19-new-years-eve/Father+Knows+Best+1950-06-15+(43)+Picnic+For+Fathers+Day.mp3.

[49] Ibid., 2:06-2:28.

form of showing love and appreciation for Jim. “No matter what we buy for your father we'll have to buy with his money,” Margaret says to which Betty replies, “I’ll pay for it out of my allowance.”[50] Margaret then points out that the very allowance Betty intends to use is in fact, money from her father, and this back and forth continues. The climax of the argument is reached when Margaret declares that the Andersons will have to be with their father on the upcoming Sunday: “We are going to spend the day with your father. We're going to wait on him hand and foot, cater to his every wish. Sunday is going to be his day and that is final so let's not talk about it anymore.” And to this Bud replies, “Now you can’t even talk,” delivering the final blow, undermining Margaret.[51] This argument takes up the first four or so minutes of the program, deeming it important enough to take up a fifth of the episode. Though the argument was not necessarily volatile, and was very common for most families, it demonstrates the lack of respect given to Margaret by her children. Elaine Tyler May discusses this very occurrence: “Because male authority was widely associated with a man’s ability as a provider, the more a family’s traditional gender roles were disrupted, the more likely the children were to disapprove of the shift in the balance of power in their homes.”[52] The conversation between Margaret and Betty about money exemplifies what Margaret is fighting up against; first, she does not want to use Jim’s money to celebrate him. This reasserts that Jim is the sole provider of the family. Second, in attempting to gather her family for Father’s Day, Margaret is disrupting the traditional roles that her children had grown accustomed to by taking over the position of power. This episode, whether intentional or not, showcases the emotional battles that mothers often must combat in the home. Mothers have always been the “frontlines” of difficult decisions at home and are often

[50] James, “Picnic for Father’s Day,” 2:32-2:41.
[51] Ibid., 3:47-3:59.
[52] May, *Homeward Bound*, 53.

the ones who get blamed for things, as they are typically present with the children for the most concentrated amount of time. When Margaret puts her foot down and makes decisions for the entire family, she is performing a role that was usually handed off to the father. This role disruption that May describes is displayed by the pushback from her children. In this case, Margaret's clear and strong demands that her children cancel their plans for Father's Day disrupted the balance that was typically established in the home.

The next scene of this episode portrays a dynamic between Jim and Margaret that was commonplace in how men treated their wives. Arriving home late, Jim tells Margaret he ran into their friend Hector. She cuts in with questions about Hector and his wife, as Jim becomes irate.

> JIM. Margaret, will you please let me tell you about Hector?
> MARGARET. Why of course dear go right ahead.
> JIM. Alright...try to tell a woman anything it's just like...what was I talking about?[53]

The studio audience erupts in laughter seemingly at Jim's comment and the situation. But really, the laughter is not at the situation, but rather at Margaret. It is not as though Margaret was having a completely different conversation with Jim or attempting to discuss topics that were unrelated. Rather, Margaret, though somewhat abrasive in how she cut in, was attempting to converse with Jim by asking follow up questions about his interaction with Hector. Instead of explaining that he has something important to say, or engaging in a back-and-forth dialogue, Jim only becomes more irritated and takes his anger out on women in general, not just Margaret. The problem is not that a joke was at Margaret's expense, but rather the harmful messaging the joke contained. Messaging that not only encouraged and modeled disrespect of mothers and wives by their children and husbands but that was being broadcast to thousands of families every Thursday night.

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[53] James, "Picnic for Father's Day," 6:22-6:36.

In fact, the end of this very episode confirms the public's stance on Jim Anderson's behavior. After the final scene of the episode, the narrator suspends the fourth wall and makes an announcement to Robert Young, the actor who portrays Jim Anderson, directly.

> NARRATOR. Bob…We were all quite thrilled when the National Father's Day Committee named you screen father of the year. Well, this is the committee's medal and they've asked me to present it to you with their blessings and warmest wishes.[54]

After thunderous applause, Robert Young takes the microphone and gives his acceptance speech.

> R. YOUNG. Thank you very much Bill. Ladies and gentlemen, naturally I am very proud of this honor, but not for myself alone. As the father of four girls, I have spent a lot of time and gnawed a lot of nails in the waiting rooms of various hospitals in southern California. Now, to prospective fathers who are wearing themselves to a frazzle, pacing endlessly up and down in hospital corridors all over the country, I have a most reassuring message. Fellas, you see, they do give medals to fathers.[55]

Robert Young winning the award for Best On-Screen Father at the end of this specific episode is not a surprising choice even though Jim comes across as a very flawed father. Margaret's efforts are continuously usurped by the very person she is trying to celebrate, and Jim deeply resents his family for spending time with him on Father's Day. He does not act like the doting, family forward man that Margaret paints him out to be at the beginning of the episode. However, this behavior was expected, and encouraged, for fathers during this era. Like June Cleaver's dilemma with her husband Ward, Margaret cannot please both her children and her husband. Jim, on the other hand, has no forethought about how his actions could affect his wife or his children. The end of Young's speech gets at something incredibly powerful: While they do not give medals to mothers, they *do* in fact give medals to fathers.[56] The entire episode follows Margaret trying to

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[54] James, "Picnic for Father's Day," 27:27-27:47.
[55] Ibid., 27:50-28:22.
[56] The Father's Day/Mother's Day Council, Inc., as it is called today, began in 1931. The first recipient was Douglas Macarthur, an American Army General, in 1942. Robert Young won in 1950, along with Jackie Robinson amongst others. The council did not begin including Mother's Day in the awards until the 1980s, after the group absorbed the newly formed National Mother's Day Council. Although Mother's Day had been established at the same time as Father's Day, it took 70 more years for it to have the same kind of support behind it. Mother's Day was incorporated

do exactly that, award Jim for being a decent father.

Consumerism and Politics

The emphasis on improvement through consumerism was a key tool that entertainment media wielded to keep Americans engaged. Like television today, there was almost an equal amount of screen time for advertisements as there was for programming. Through product advertisements, advertisers were able to furtively promote consumerism by passing off the American dream as something that could be bought and sold. Magazines which stressed the importance of motherhood and domestic life often contained advertisements for cleaning products or appliances to make women feel compelled to keep their homes up to date and keep up with the neighbors. "The biggest boom in consumer spending, for example, was in household goods."[57] Magazine advertisements, radio sponsorships, and television commercials all worked in tandem to curate how families should look and act, as well as products they needed to stay up to date. As the characteristics of American families had been established, their homes needed to be up to standard as well.

In a December issue of *Woman's Home Companion* there was an advertisement (Figure 1) for *Singer*'s new vacuum model. The ad explained that it would be a suitable Christmas present "for her." It claimed it was "One present you can use right away…" and depicted a woman vacuuming during Christmas beside her husband and her daughter in their idyllic home.[58] The impact of an ad like this is two-fold. First, it insinuates that service for others was imperative

"in order to better recognize the role both parents play in the family unit."; The Father's Day / Mother's Day Council, Inc., accessed November 10, 2023, https://www.momanddadday.com/.

[57] Coontz, "The Way We Never Were," 25.

[58] Singer Advertisement, *Woman's Home Companion*, December, 1956, as cited in Nancy A. Walker, *Women's Magazines, 1940-1960*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan New York, 1998), 144.

to the role of housewife. It depicted her as strictly domestic and that gifts she received should reflect this by serving others before serving herself. Second, this advertisement demonstrated what a "successful" woman looked like and the products that made her desirable: She was a "good" housewife because she was prompt with her chores and had cutting edge products. Framing women as consumers first and homemakers second was a surreptitious way of presenting capitalist ideology to readers. This kind of advertising equated success and goodness with materialism, illustrating the harmful belief that women were meant to be in the home.

The aspirational quality of advertisements and content in magazines extended to radio and television too. Radio shows were often owned, and therefore sponsored, by large manufacturing companies like Procter & Gamble.[59] Radio and TV shows meticulously encoded their shows with morals and values that became synonymous with Americanness. Each *Father Knows Best* episode opened with a message from their sponsor, *Maxwell House*, a coffee company. The radio show would begin with the following introduction:

> GIRL. Mother, is *Maxwell House* really the only coffee in the world?
> MOTHER. Well, your father says so, and your *Father Knows Best*!
> NARRATOR. …A half hour visit with your neighbors, the Anderson's. Brought to you by America's favorite coffee, *Maxwell House*. The coffee that's always good to the last drop.[60]

Just the introduction gives listeners insight into the world that *Father Knows Best* created for its audience. "Your neighbors" garnered a sense of familiarity: The Anderson's were not just characters, but rather someone listeners felt they knew, real-life neighbors. *Maxwell House*'s alignment with *Father Knows Best* was strategic as radio sitcoms, unlike radio soaps, were listened to by the whole family. If Jim Anderson drank *Maxwell House*, so would listeners. It

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[59] Levine, *Her Stories*, 25.
[60] *Father Knows Best*, episode 20, "Safety Campaign," written by Ed James, aired January 5, 1950, on NBC. https://archive.org/details/father-knows-best-1949-12-29-19-new-years-eve/Father+Knows+Best+1950-01-05+(20)+Safety+Campaign.mp3.

created a united front of consumers; everyone in the family wanted *Maxwell House* products, not just coffee drinkers. It was not just Jim's favorite, but "America's favorite" too. The radio version of *Father Knows Best* paved the way for the cultural relevancy that would emerge from the television adaptation of the show.

In addition to sitcom characters, even narrators imparted a sense of Americanness onto audiences. An episode of *Father Knows Best* had the following narration: "Once again it's breakfast time in the white frame house on Maple Street."[61] The mention of "Maple Street," coupled with the location of Springfield, demonstrates how well sitcoms created white picket fenced towns that did not really exist, "simultaneously everywhere and nowhere."[62] This gave audiences ability to "fill in the blanks" of the Anderson's lives with their own personal identities. "Maple Street" and the detail of their "white frame house" were significant to the historical moment in which this episode aired.

The 1950s saw a large uptick in American consumerism, especially for products for the home. Media was not simply advertising goods for the home, but the houses themselves. After WWII, as many Americans attempted to leave multi-family homes behind, the purchase of single-family homes in suburbs, like "Springfield," increased. According to Coontz, the building boom and the birth of organized housing developments caused "substantial numbers of white working-class Americans to move out of the cities into affordable developments, such as Levittown."[63] This large movement out of major metropolitan cities is reflected in home specific consumerism as well: "...purchases of household furnishings and appliances climbed 240

[61] James, "Picnic for Father's Day," 26:20-26:24.
[62] Mock, "Honey, I'm Home!", 29; and Austerlitz, "Leave It to Beaver," 54.
[63] Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 24; Levittown's were suburban housing developments that were characteristic of the postwar era as this was where many Americans went in an effort to leave the city.

percent" in the five years following WWII.[64] Even something as simple as characterizing the Anderson home as "white framed" alludes to this Levittown quality that Coontz mentions. Although to the listener this may seem like a throw-away line from the narrators, it was intentional. The line's subtlety represents how the personification of the idealized nuclear family through the Anderson's reinforces the beliefs about American families that magazines and advertisers were creating. The familiarity yet unidentifiability made viewers feel like they too could be an Anderson, by simply living in the suburbs and drinking *Maxwell House*.

The overt display of the American home in the media was intentional. Although these advertisements range from the late 1940s to the mid 1950s, each demonstrates the contribution that advertising made to constructing pro-consumer, anti-communist rhetoric that was becoming more and more pertinent. Advertisements not only satisfied the needs of advertisers by increasing the sale of home goods, but it encouraged American capitalism, which was threatened throughout this Cold War period, as well. These idyllic homes and "trendy" appliances were a part of the political and cultural fabric of this time. In 1959, Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had their famous "Kitchen Debate" in Moscow. The event took place at the sight of a model American kitchen, where the two discussed American consumerism and capitalism. Nixon explains to Khrushchev that "after twenty years, many Americans want a new house or a new kitchen. Their kitchen is obsolete by that time…The American system is designed to take advantage of new inventions and new techniques."[65] This

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[64] Coontz, *The Way We Never Were* 25; The 1954 supreme court ruling, Brown v. Board of Education, caused desegregation of schools to begin. This ushered in "busing," a strategy to bring Black and other students of color to White schools, and vice versa. This is yet another factor that led to White families chasing the "American Dream" to move out of urban cities and into suburban, and more importantly White, neighborhoods; Lesley Kennedy, "What Led to Desegregation Busing-And Did It Work?," HISTORY, July 9, 2019, https://www.history.com/news/desegregation-busing-schools.

[65] Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, "Kitchen Debate," (American National Exhibition, Moscow, Soviet Union, July 24, 1959), https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/1959-07-24.pdf.

blatant explanation of American consumerism, specifically planned obsolescence, upholds the very idea that entertainment media was promoting.[66] Further, Nixon explicitly calls out women and their role in America. When explaining why the kitchen has so many new appliances he says, "In America, we like to make life easier for women…" to which Khrushchev replies "Your capitalistic attitude toward women does not occur under Communism."[67] This interaction demonstrates so much more than just diplomacy or new appliances. It shows how intertwined capitalism was with women and motherhood, and reveals that Nixon, one of the most powerful people in the US, was acutely aware of it.

> In Nixon's vision, the suburban ideal of homeownership would tame two potentially disruptive forces: women and workers…Homeownership would lessen class consciousness among workers, who would set their sights toward the middle-class ideal. The family home would be the place where a man could display his success through the accumulation of consumer goods. Women would reap rewards for domesticity by surrounding themselves with commodities…For both men and women, homeownership would reinforce aspirations for upward mobility and diminish the potential for social unrest.[68]

Entertainment media was not just promoting what Hollywood deemed worthy; rather entertainment media took core "American" beliefs and assisted the government in dispersing them. Media during this time went beyond influencing individuals, making it clear that postwar media, especially television which brought to life the gender roles, societal standards, and idealized homes that magazines and radio described, was targeting something larger. This idealized family and home was being created as a form of American propaganda.

"Thanksgiving Day" is an infamous episode of *Father Knows Best*, often discussed because of the final scene in the episode where Jim Anderson says grace before Thanksgiving

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[66] Planned obsolescence is the intentional engineering of products to break or need repair in a faster amount of time than is expected. It is often a business model used in technology to increase the purchase of a product and creates a feeling of needing to constantly upgrade one's appliances. John Zukowsky, "Planned Obsolescence," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed January 16, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/planned-obsolescence.
[67] Nixon, "Kitchen Debate."
[68] May, *Homeward Bound*, 156-157.

dinner. This portion of the episode strays from the effortfully apolitical messaging that is generally found in *Father Knows Best*. To understand *Father Knows Best*'s otherwise apolitical stance, it is important to look at the episode wholly, not just the final scene. There is no mention of politics or any reference to a world beyond Springfield throughout the rest of the episode. Instead, the plot follows Kathy winning an award for a poem she wrote about Thanksgiving and the power struggle that ensues between Kathy and Jim. Most of the episode is told from Jim's point of view, chronicling his adverse reactions to her poem and the fraught family dynamics that dominated sitcom television during this era.[69] Although the political messaging is at the 23rd minute of a 25-minute episode, it remains the episode's legacy.

The episode begins with Jim finding out Kathy has won an award for her poetry. Jim overzealously congratulates Kathy and tells the whole town about her talents before even reading the poem. Initially, Kathy is astounded by the support from her father and how proud she made him. Once Jim reads the poem, and dislikes it, Jim insults Kathy.[70] Her confidence is shattered, and she is unable to read her poem in front of the town due to embarrassment. More than feeling like a failure, Kathy seems struck with fear, even calling out "I want my mummy and daddy" when she was on stage.[71] It was not stage fright, but rather fear of what would come from disappointing her father. Erin Lee Mock explains this in her article: "Even when the men are not violent, their wives and children are constantly on guard. Sitcom men can be merciful, but they are erratic, swinging between a self-loathing over the impact of their instability and the utter denial of it."[72] Jim has this erratic behavior throughout the series. As early as the radio show, the

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[69] *Father Knows Best*, season 1, episode 8, "Thanksgiving Day," directed by William D. Russell, written by Dorothy Cooper, aired November 21, 1954, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23-fUxeVlUg.
[70] Ibid., 11:59-12:18.
[71] Ibid., 16:26-16:29.
[72] Mock, "Honey, I'm Home!", 30.

disruption of power, which May described earlier, as well as Mock's discussion of instability lay the foundation for Jim's behavior. Jim is upset when Margaret takes charge for Father's Day and is similarly angry in this episode when Kathy's poem "embarrasses" him. Sitcom family dynamics reflected the temperament of the sitcom father figures.

This assertion of manhood by fathers that both May and Mock discuss is also present in the notorious grace scene.[73] As the family gathers around the Thanksgiving table, Jim begins to say grace: "Oh Lord, we give thee thanks from the depths of our humble hearts for all the blessings thou has seen fit to bestow upon us. We thank thee for the food, which graces our table, the roof, which covers our head." While this part of the speech was standard for saying grace, the tone quickly changes. Jim looks down the barrel of the camera, shifting his focus away from his family. Jim is now speaking directly to viewers.

> JIM. We thank thee for the privilege of living as free men in a country which respects our freedom and our personal rights to worship and think and speak as we choose. We thank thee for making us a family, for giving us sincerity and understanding. But most of all, dear Lord, we thank thee for giving us the greatest gift a family may know—the gift of love for one another. Amen.[74]

The language in this part of the speech is crucial to understanding how politics became intrinsically linked with gender and societal standards. Jim mentions free speech, freedom of religion, even free thought, which were all strictly American ideals that many believed would be destroyed by Communism. The tone in which he delivers the speech is aggressive and domineering, asserting his masculinity with each sentence. The anti-communist language coupled with his tone of voice asserted power over both his family and viewers. This speech does two things: It restores his sense of manhood after the embarrassment of Kathy's poem and it takes a publicly pro-American, anti-communist stance. By suggesting throughout the entire

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[73] May, *Homeward Bound*, 53; and Mock, "Honey, I'm Home!", 30.
[74] Cooper, "Thanksgiving Day," 23:20-24:07.

series that any family in America could be like the Andersons, *Father Knows Best* was able to indoctrinate viewers into believing anything the Andersons said or did. Since men felt immense pressure to protect their families from nuclear war, Jim Anderson was the perfect vehicle to demonstrate how to behave under these circumstances.[75] Especially in the wake of the Red Scare and the Hollywood Ten, a television show demonstrating American Patriotism was momentous.[76] This episode's existence so early in *Father Knows Best's* run, really lays the groundwork for how apolitical shows allowed themselves to break their own rules.

Although an argument can be made that television and magazines were simply reflecting the society that already existed or that they were mindless forms of entertainment, there were very real moments in which the government utilized television and the media for their own means. In 1948, Richard Moore, a Nixon Administration aide, and John Guedel, a television executive, conceived of a television competition for a Levittown-style home in California that could be won by writing a letter about the benefits of living under capitalism.[77] The letters were then sent in CARE packages to Italy to target upcoming elections that were seen as high risk for communists to come into power.[78] Every week, one lucky letter writer was selected as a contestant on the television show *People Are Funny*, and got to compete for their very own suburban, all-American, Kitchen-Debate style home.[79] While the letters made an impact, and

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[75] Thomas Bishop, "Introduction: Fatherhood and the Family Fallout Shelter," essay, in *Every Home a Fortress: Cold War Fatherhood and the Family Fallout Shelter* (Cambridge, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020), 1–19. At 6.

[76] The Hollywood Ten were a part of a blacklist that circulated in Hollywood during the Cold War. It listed known communists or communist sympathizers. The Ten were put on trial by the Hollywood Un-American Activities Coalition, which conducted investigations throughout that period; Thomas Patrick Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). At 15-16; and Staff Editors, "Red Scare: Cold War, McCarthyism & Facts," History.com, June 1, 2010, https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/red-scare.

[77] May, *Homeward Bound*, 153.

[78] CARE packages, a commonly known term today, were packages with food and first aid sent to allies during war. The first were sent in 1940s to help those impacted by WWII; Christopher Klein, "The First Care Package," History.com, May 11, 2016, https://www.history.com/news/the-first-care-package.

[79] May, *Homeward Bound*, 153.

none of the targeted elections fell to communism, it was more than just a letter writing campaign. In fact, this case study demonstrates the very argument that this paper has been making; entertainment media is inherently political. This specific campaign mobilized the country to reflect on the positive impact of capitalism, it used entertainment media as a tool to prevent communism and turn a scary or "complicated" political concept into something digestible, and provided the winner with the ultimate prize to fulfill their wildest, American dreams: a suburban home with top-of-the-line appliances.

Ten years after the campaign, *Father Knows Best* took their first official stance on politics. In 1959, the United States government contracted *Father Knows Best* to produce an episode explaining and encouraging the purchase of war bonds. Just five years after "Thanksgiving Day" aired, Jim Anderson demonstrated what would happen if America no longer subscribed to those uniquely "American" values. The episode was never aired on TV but was instead sent to church groups and schools to educate the public on the importance of buying war bonds and actively supporting the war effort. The episode was also included on the tape, and later DVD, of the first season.[80] The episode, titled "Twenty-Four Hours in Tyrantland," followed Jim's creation of a communist state within their house on Maple Street. He offered each Anderson kid $18.75, the price of a war bond, and if they were able to "survive" they could spend the money however they saw fit. If they could not survive, they had to buy a war bond and help Jim sell them around the neighborhood. The overall message of the episode though, strays from war bond buying and instead demonstrates the dangers of communist governments and how oppressive they are. In true *Father Knows Best* fashion, the episode begins with a message from the sponsor. However, this time the sponsor is the government. "Brought to you by the United

[80] Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946–Present*, Twentieth Anniversary ed., (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), 338.

States Treasury Department in patriotic co-operation with The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations and Screen Gems, Inc. a subsidiary of the Columbia Pictures Corporation."[81] Even the message includes "patriotic" so that viewers would not forget where they should stand as viewers of *Father Knows Best*, and more importantly as Americans.

The episode that unfolds is deeply uncomfortable, Tyrantland proving to be unkind to the Anderson children. Over the course of the episode, Jim and Margaret refuse to give their children full meals, Bud gets locked in the garage for trying to sneak out, and Betty tries to unionize against the family. These scenes, though, are not the worst of it. As the 24 hours begin to come to a close, Jim expresses his concerns to Margaret: "If our young people don't think enough of our way of life to try to preserve it, I shudder to think what's going to happen to America."[82] The "young people" that Jim is referring to are certainly not just his children, but rather the citizens of the United States. Akin to "Thanksgiving Day," Jim's words, seemingly about his family, are instead a social commentary. Jim employs fear to instill urgency in viewers, that every day Americans would be able to "save" the world from communism.

Despite their fear throughout the simulation, the Anderson kids "survive" the 24 hours and when the clock strikes eight, they jump around in glee. In a last-ditch effort to make his children, and audience, understand the cruel ways of "Tyrantland," Jim delivers one of the most sinister lines of the episode as he moves the clock's little hand backwards a full hour: "Who says it's eight o'clock? This clock says it's only seven."[83] The kids stare at Jim dumbfounded, unable to understand how he could be so ruthless. They attempt to level with him, Betty crying out that it was against the law, the rules of the game. Jim states: "In Tyrantland I am the law. I make the

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[81] *Father Knows Best*, episode, "Twenty-Four Hours In Tyrantland," directed by Peter Tewksbury, written by Ed James and Roswell Rogers, 1959, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzGXhO6IHng. At 0:13-0:26.
[82] Ibid., 22:43-22:48.
[83] Ibid., 26:38-26:48.

rules, give the orders."[84] Eerily reminiscent of the speeches delivered by real dictators at this time, Jim's tyranny was at an all-time high. This shows his final play at illustrating his perception of the "violent" and "erratic" behavior of communist countries.

Betty, defeated, finally gives up, claiming she would not live in such a place if she did not have to. Now understanding the point of Tyrantland, she says "and thank Heaven I don't have to…I never realized before what a wonderful thing we have here in America."[85] Bud and Kathy join in, agreeing with Betty. Finally, the true purpose of the episode is revealed. It was not that war bonds were important; the true message was how wonderful America was and accordingly, how horrible Communist countries were. In fact, excluding a very brief description at the beginning of the episode where Jim explains why he has decided to volunteer to sell them, they never actually explain how to buy war bonds. Instead, the episode demonstrates what would happen if America was a communist country, a far more effective way to capture viewers.

Finally, after the scripted portion of the episode ends, Robert Young speaks to viewers as himself, an American citizen, and of course, Father of the Year.

> R. YOUNG. We went through this ordeal hoping it will help dispel some of that apathy that constantly threatens our security. And also, to remind you of the real values behind savings bonds. Sure, they are fine investments, but they also are shares in our country, helping to keep America strong and helping to stiffen our peace power.[86]

"Peace power" was an ironic way to describe the Cold War effort outside of the United States, however that is the rationale that the government stood behind. If the true violence used to suppress communism was being broadcast, what American would truly think it right? That is why the Anderson's were employed by the government. They were your neighbors, they drank *Maxwell House*, they were trustworthy and reliable. Why would Jim Anderson, or more

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[84] James, "Twenty-Four Hours In Tyrantland," 27:07-27:12.
[85] Ibid., 27:50- 28:53.
[86] Ibid., 30:28-30:50.

accurately, why would Robert Young, lie about the dangers of communism and the best way to prevent its spread? This episode demonstrates the power that the idealized American family truly held for US citizens. The creation of the idealized American family was never really about the best coffee or vacuum cleaners "for her." Instead, it was about creating a sense of aspiration that could be achieved through a devotion to one's country, a deep sense of pride and patriotism.

These political episodes, in conjunction with the gender roles and consumerist ideologies set out in entertainment media, demonstrate how connected the three mediums were. Magazines, like *Ladies' Home Journal*, offered a format for women to read and digest the expectations they were meant to meet in the home and as White women in American society. Television and radio programs, such as *Portia Faces Life*, *Father Knows Best*, and *Leave It to Beaver*, relied on family forward messaging to promote pro-America ideals, and uphold gender stereotypes and dynamics for men and women in the home. Where radio offered women an outlet to enjoy media while still being able to do the jobs required of them in the home, television offered visually tangible examples of how White, American families were meant to look and act if they were to be considered patriotic citizens of the United States. Finally, government sponsored media clearly demonstrates how inextricably linked American values, consumerism, and entertainment media were. Each form of media, and their advertisers, worked in tandem to not only assist Americans after the war in finding their footing as nuclear families, but also encourage a sense of a united front in the face of mutually assured destruction.[87] American entertainment media was not an escapist activity one could turn their mind off to. Rather, it was a powerful tool, wielded to form everyday citizens into patriotic, consumerist Americans.

[87] This was a military strategy, most famously attributed to the Cold War as both the United States and the Soviet Union had access to nuclear bombs. The threat of nuclear destruction from both powers was enough to ensure that neither would drop one; however, the fear of nuclear weaponry is what made the Cold War last as long as it did.

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Figure 1: Singer Vacuum Advertisement (*Woman's Home Companion*)