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First Blood: So-Called Battered Men on the Offensive

by Richard Leader

It all started with a push. In the film, *First Blood*, the small town of Hope, Washington is ruled over by the Sheriff Will Teasle, a despot who prefers his community nice and boring: to preserve his ordered universe he makes the mistake of “pushing” one John Rambo, who just happened to be the quintessential protagonist of the 1980s. While Sylvester Stallone went on to play John Rambo for another two sequels, children the world over got to take up the role of the character in at least nine different blood-soaked videogames, and underground comic book artists even recruited his likeness for pornographic scenes of rape and destruction—even as then President Ronald Regan took to proclaiming Rambo a Republican in his speeches—Teasle himself is hardly a household name despite the eponymous listing of his nemesis in dictionaries.

This, of course, should come as no surprise: Teasle was an outlandish character, a caricature of a man who was willing to let his obsession with proving his own authority result in the destruction of the town he professed to love, the injury and death incurred by its inhabitants a mere distraction in his quest to bring Rambo to justice. Or at least audiences were *supposed* to think him an outlandish character, a cartoon intended to serve as a foil to Stallone’s sanitized version John Rambo; the redneck insinuations and the plump physicality of the actor Brian Dennehy working in concert to make his actions seem less reasonable than they actually were by male society’s standards. After all, President George W. Bush had less cause to invade Iraq. When looking at the sacrifices that he was willing to make in order to have Saddam Hussein’s pistol mounted on an office plaque, Teasle begins to look a bit less fantastic.

While Teasle has many real-life counterparts—all of whom most likely choose to identify with the Rambo character, such reversals being the social utility of genre fiction—perhaps the most chill-

ing example is that of David Brame. The son and brother of police officers, Brame also entered into career in law enforcement and became Tacoma's chief of police at the relatively young age of 43, having less experience than several of his more seasoned but less glamorous competitors for the position. Indeed, a certain sense of stardom pervaded his command: his swearing-in ceremony was the most elaborate in Tacoma history, often remembered as "the coronation" by witnesses, and he quickly became a regional celebrity, giving a speech at a local flag dedication ceremony on the first anniversary of September 11th. Later, he would find himself in the national spotlight when it was discovered that the Beltway Sniper, John Mohammad, once took target practice in a Tacoma back yard.

On April 26, 2003 Brame was in the spotlight for a final time, having murdered his wife in the parking lot of a strip mall before turning the gun on himself, their two young children sitting in another car nearby. Only in the wake of his actions on that day did the truth about Brame begin to emerge: his term as chief was one of intense corruption where he ruthlessly forced opponents into early retirement while he routinely promoted friends who were loyal to him alone, even if their test scores ranked them at the bottom of the barrel. Brame himself had failed his share of psychological exams as a recruit and he was accused of rape in 1988, an accusation that investigators believed to be credible although prosecution never went forward. The public records of that accusation were later sealed by city manager Ray Corpuz, the same man who would appoint Brame as chief.

But it was in private where he was at his most vicious: he maintained absolute control of his wife, Crystal Judson, keeping her under his thumb economically and terrorizing her with physical abuse: his favorite tactic was to send her flowers after a fit of violence and then deny that he sent them, using their appearance as an excuse to accuse her of having a male admirer and then beat her once again for her fictitious transgression. He even scraped his own

arm on one occasion and with the resulting wound having been videotaped by a fellow police officer (one he would later promote to serve as an assistant chief), he threatened Crystal that he would make sure it was *her* who would be charged with abuse if she failed to comply with his wishes. After she made plans to divorce him he used the police department as leverage against her, forcing her to entertain therapy sessions with a police chaplain who blithely dismissed her complaints that David was trying to coerce her into having group sex with an equally unwilling female officer under his command. He would later use his foremost assistant chief, Catherine Woodard, to intimidate Crystal on several occasions.

Despite the mountain of evidence, David's father, Eugene Brame, still insists that Crystal was the abusive partner in the relationship. He even spoke at a Washington State symposium on domestic violence, commending the panel of lawmakers for their work. He added that he wished to "remind them that men can be the abused as well and children can be abused," only to continue on in front of the rapt audience of 400, "This thing happened in David's case. He was driven over the edge and his mind snapped at the last moment."

In other words, she pushed him and he pushed back: Eugene Brame's rhetoric is nothing new—so-called men's rights advocates have been uttering such sentiments for years—only here the meaning of "push" is obvious. She defied her husband, his absolute and unconditional control over her, and male entitlement allowed him to view that defiance as abuse of his personhood, akin to a physical beating, just as Sheriff Teasle and Rambo each viewed the other as making the initial, and therefore most egregious, push: the former wanted a supposed vagrant out of his town and on the road down to Portland while the latter wanted to exercise his God given right to enjoy a hamburger wherever he pleased.

That was not the only "push" however: moments after that incident in the film, as Rambo was being led through the basement

corridors of the police station, Teasle's equally tyrannical white deputy belittled a black janitor with a "come on Leroy, sling that paint, boy" that went forever unchallenged. (One of the most notable cases of corruption under Brame's administration involved a sergeant named Leroy who was passed over for promotion four times in just six months in favor of lower scoring candidates.) If he had pushed back, as Rambo eventually did by visiting destruction over the space of an entire county, it seems unlikely that Reagan would have ever held a sign declaring that "Leroy is a Republican." When Rambo is finally confronted by his former commanding officer, Colonel Troutman, on the extent of his pushing back, his only response is a dour "they drew first blood," which he repeats breathlessly a second time, the tautology serving as much to convince himself that his violent actions were justified as it is to make audiences remember the exact moment from which the film's all-important byline sprung. After all, the John Rambo of *First Blood* is not the same one—who lacked a first name—that occupied the David Morrell novel from which the story sprung: here, the idea of "first blood" represents Sylvester Stallone's interpretation of the character, one that audiences were supposed to accept as possessing the moral high ground, rather than Morrell's sociopathic monster.

Contemporary Rambo fans are themselves a divided lot with some preferring Stallone's salute to Vietnam veterans while their more—perhaps ever so slightly—literate counterparts are drawn to the novel's more thorough painting of the Sheriff figure, there a Korean War veteran who is in the midst of a divorce which is used to further explain his proclivity to engage in a tête-à-tête in order to maintain some semblance of control over a world that seems to be increasingly slipping out of his grasp. Perhaps if Rambo did not exist as his White Whale, he would have followed the same route as David Brame.

Morrell himself, to this day, seems surprised that many readers of *First Blood*, prior to the film, had latched onto Sheriff Teasle as the main character. It should have been expected: throughout male

history, freedom has traditionally meant not freedom from domination but the ability to dominate others; the Greek writer Thucydides once used "liberty" and "empire" as synonyms. Just as the Code of Hammurabi listed separate punishments for slaves and free men, while Christian Rome continued the legal system of *honestiores* and *humiliores*—their linguistic legacy should be obvious—patterned after the patrician and plebeian roles of the past, even today, all persons are not guaranteed the same right to interpret "pushes" as actual assaults, nor are they all given the same moral imperative to push back (remember Leroy). Rambo and Teasle can be viewed as two sides of the same coin—averaging their personalities between their cinematic and print incarnations reveals similar rationales behind their behavior—and they form a continuum of white male entitlement ranging from David Brame to the perpetrators of Columbine. By the creation and idolization of mythical figures such as Rambo, men can continue to pretend that they do not identify with those men patterned after Teasle (or Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold for that matter) or other such embarrassments because there are more dynamic and alluring alternatives in place.

While the blame for Columbine was cast in a wide net, from films such as *The Basketball Diaries* to videogames such as *DOOM*, nothing was ever made of David Brame's obsession with The Godfather series: he even had a mounted photo of Al Pacino on his office wall. Given the youth of Harris and Klebold, the inclination to turn to their media influences is more understandable: being that they were not yet old enough to have a string of failed psychological exams and rape accusations under their belts, it was necessary for a society set on willing itself into a state of mock-surprise to turn their microscope towards their more passive pursuits. However, in that such active infractions never seemed to slow Brame's inexorable career advancement, it seems more than a little bit disingenuous for the same society that once ignored those red flags (indeed, if the Tacoma police had taken domestic violence seriously, John Mohammad might have been jailed on a battery charge and the

Beltway shootings might never have occurred) to highlight them in retrospect, pinning the sum of the blame on Brame's supposedly damaged psyche alone, to the exclusion of outside media influences—influences to which adults are supposedly immune.

That the police chief of Tacoma was likely patterning his administration after the mafia is something that should not have escaped the attention of the press; after all, these are people who traditionally thrive on such facile irony, their readership not requiring them to go the extra mile and view law enforcement and the mob as equally patriarchal institutions, thus a similarity exists through syllogism even without the poster on the office wall existing as evidence. Still, that such irony was excluded from bombastic headlines and kept from front page after front page is a mystery: perhaps it would have raised questions about whether or not it should be only police officers who are forbidden to watch *The Sopranos* while the rest of us are free to participate in the cult of cool that surrounds the glamorization of crime, from our centuries old fascination with pirates to the MTV show, *Cribs*, a recycling of the *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* phenomenon, which even has a running joke where celebrities take special care to note that the movie *Scarface* is the linchpin of their DVD collections, some even preemptively apologizing to the audience if it is missing.

Bad-cops themselves have never been more popular: a generation that was raised on Michael Chiklis playing the saccharine-sweet Tony Scali in *The Commish* (patterned after Anthony Schembri who was recently in the news for an ill-advised showing of a Chris Rock video at a meeting with NAACP leaders) can now watch him as the so-called antihero Vic Mackey on *The Shield*. The series even featured an officer who was responsible for his wife's death (he paid a criminal to break into her home in order to steal items he lost in a divorce settlement) who later takes his own life in a parking lot, presumably an adaptation of the Brame case. However, there the officer was only indirectly responsible for her death: the writers and producers lacked the conviction to play it one way or another, any sin-

cerity being unnecessary when they can so easily satisfy everyone with melodrama; something that is intensely political in its inherent apoliticism.

Popular imagination of the term "antihero" is centered on the idea of flaws and vices (as if 'traditional' estimation of such values are a constant), often in an anachronistic conceit that demands that the pop culture of the past neatly divided its characters into white and black colored hats. As the bulk of the vices associated with the antiheroes of today have lost their moral imperative, to pretend that antiheroes exist in an altogether different category is a fantasy, one that is expressly political in establishing a straw man to frame moral arguments; similar to how those in the sex industry work hard to more firmly establish the myth of American Puritanism. Being that the system of values that antiheroes supposedly transgress is framed not by social reality but by social fiction, the idea of The State conveniently becomes elided from the equation.

Without the advantage of hindsight, it can indeed be difficult to determine what value a contemporary society places on a certain hero, real or imagined—at least compared to what can be said about the Roman Horatius who stood steadfastly on the bridge—but vice is seldom reason enough to believe that a hero lacks the state sanction that would then place him in the antihero category. The gender in the previous sentence was not required to be read neutrally, after all, it being a patriarchal state. There is no reason to believe that Vic Mackey, Tony Soprano, or any of the new-wave comic book characters that are so often described as antiheroes lack state sanction just because Reagan is no longer around to officially declare them Republicans: they are all beings who are pushed and are entitled by male culture to push back, often in the most obscene ways imaginable.

The antihero then—as it is most often conceived—is a myth created to depoliticize the concept of the hero, to hide the fact that the status quo, the ruling elite, the patriarchy, or however it is con-

venient to describe the primary authority in our lives, routinely backs men that are embarrassments. Not only does it allow them to wash their hands of the undesirables, escaping responsibility as they placate the masses, it also allows them to keep the door open for their return when the controversy has faded from the public memory: e.g. disfavored icons such as Jimmy Bakker and Geraldo Rivera being allowed a second chance at glory, one that their female equivalents would never receive; the ultimate example being Oliver North who is invited once again to speak of sacrifice and heroism on Fox News despite his former extralegal support for terrorists. His brief stint as a scapegoat is over, where he effectively ‘took one for the team,’ the white male-team, one emulated by men of all colors the world over.

Regardless of the glut of bad-cop icons we have in both real life and in our popular culture, none have become dictionary entries like Rambo, entrusted into our lexicons, it being too truthful, too embarrassing, and so we often find it convenient to block it out of our collective memories. Because of that, despite the fact that *First Blood* was released in cinemas over twenty years ago and barely a week goes by when it is not rebroadcast on one television network or another, not one comparison between David Brame and Sheriff Teasle was ever made. Not one newspaper or alternative press thought to compare them even though their geographic proximity in Washington State and their choice of careers should have made it an obvious and immediate conclusion. Still, it would have made little sense for journalists to have gone that route, given that the reaction of their readership—nearly all of whom have seen *First Blood* at least once and most certainly know who Rambo is—would most likely have been “Teasle who?”

People were so hesitant to believe what David Brame had done on April 26, 2003 that preliminary news reports made no mention of Crystal Judson and simply said that the police chief had been shot; the possibility that he had committed the violence himself

somehow seemed far less intuitive than the slim but fanciful chance that it was some kind of mob hit or assassination attempt on him. While the memory of the murder-suicide was used as a launch pad for public discussions on domestic violence (though such things seemed to fall by the wayside once exploiting the Brame case became an easy inroad for other men seeking political power in Tacoma), it often seemed to do more harm than good with the likes of Eugene Brame taking the floor at symposiums.

This has bolstered Washington State’s status as ground zero when it comes to American men’s rights groups which have been historically eclipsed in notoriety by their Australian and New Zealand counterparts with their fascist “Blackshirt” organizations, or the more theatrical—and well known—examples in the UK where a pair of men pelted Tony Blair with various powders designed to create an anthrax scare during a session at the House of Commons. The primacy of Washington State in the American men’s movement is due in no small part to the presence of Microsoft Corporation in Redmond, which marks men who fail to share in its riches as perpetual also-rans, fostering a specific kind of resentment amongst white men in the area that often gets turned towards women as a class.

Most of the major cities in Washington all have their own minor-celebrities in the men’s movement, with websites such as Backlash.com (run by a disgruntled ex-Microsoft employee who blames a pink-collar management ghetto at the company for a sexual harassment claim leveled against him) existing on the fringe, while not all that dissimilar sites such as BatteredMen.com, a subset of the more general Seattle-based MenWeb.org (whose purveyor was once in charge of the men’s section of MSN.com until Microsoft phased it out while pumping money into forming MSN Women—a crass partnership with iVillage, Lifetime, and other demographic trivialities—which he then inexplicably viewed as some sort of feminist conspiracy), often get taken seriously by mainstream domestic

violence resources for the lack of better alternatives.

When it comes to the question of men and domestic violence, denying the obvious is generally the foremost goal: not just in regard to their immense share of the culpability, but also in the unsurprisingly futile endeavor of putting human faces to the doctored statistics of alleged male victims. While a number of roughly 834,000 is routinely produced by men's rights activists as the amount of men who suffer some form of domestic abuse in a given year—the figure, taken from a 1998 Justice Department report, being rendered specious given their refusal to acknowledge the more damning aspects of the study, favoring to pick and choose amongst other data sets for their rallying cries—anecdotal evidence to bolster such claims is slight and the personal account that is actually compelling remains a *rara avis*. Indeed, men's rights publications and websites are voracious for such anecdotes, which themselves constitute their own peculiar genre of literature.

An unruly mishmash of design, BatteredMen.com is filled in part with checklists and warning signs rudely plagiarized from feminist sources and initiatives, while the rest of the content is divided between borrowed reprints of articles provided by celebrity pundits and academics working on behalf of the Independent Women's Forum—a libertarian venture of big business special-interest groups that would prefer the world believe that feminism began and ended with Ayn Rand—and often comically amateurish male writers whose own lack of means and status forces them to use the site as a bridge to sell formulaic new-age materials such as instructional videotapes demonstrating psychic-exercises for so-called “ultra-sensitive men.”

With such a chimerical combination of contributors, with the men lazily allowing themselves to become the underdogs on their own website, heroes and mythology are necessary in order to avoid reality and keep the peace: indeed, unlike feminists who would often prefer women's shelters to remain single-sexed for the comfort and security of the residents, men are so hungry for tales of violent

women to underscore their cause that they nearly worship the ones that do come forward, one of whom uses Batteredmen.com to promote her own erotica website. If Cathy Young or Wendy McElroy, two of their most admired pundits, admitted to abusing an intimate partner, it would only make them even greater heroes (or anti-heroes) to the same men's rights crowd that blames their own lack of publishing success on a “Lace Curtain”—a mythological bloc of man-hating feminists that somehow maintains control of all the presses—while ignoring the fact that their friends at the Independent Women's Forum owe the success of their own careers to the powerful men who are bankrolling them from the shadows. The most telling aspect of this phenomenon is that, despite the show that most men's rights websites put on about being gay affirmative, there is little attention paid to homosexual relationships that encompass the vast majority of men suffering from domestic violence; as there is no woman to blame, there is no real interest.

While feminists have created a wide framework out of the lived experiences of women, the average anecdote from an alleged male victim is instead created to fit into preconceived theories that are then used to construct and organize the events of the account: being that truth is often stranger than fiction, that men so often claim to have been severely beaten with objects—many largely ineffective when it comes to real violence—with direct ties to femininity (hair brushes, stiletto heels, etc.) or to props indicative of domesticity (bowls, rolling pins, picture frames), indicate that these narratives are not very strange at all but are instead rather derivative in their use of semiotics; these tales are most often not a reflection of actual events but a form of genre fiction that should be read as cheap misogynist allegory. More balanced accounts admit to suffering not from physical abuse, but from emotional: something with hardly quantifiable standards and a bar that grows ever lower due to men's need as a social class to present their own ‘victims’ to challenge the claims of feminists.

For all of the incessant rhetoric about how male victims of domestic violence are ‘shamed’ by society, parallel to outlandish beliefs that chivalry costs men as a gender more than it provides for them, in a strange twist, amongst the contributors to BatteredMen.com it has become a badge of honor to claim to be the largest, most physically intimidating battered man on the block: according to the website, one might surmise that the average male victim of domestic violence is roughly six-foot two and well over two hundred pounds, not to mention extremely adept at wrestling and several forms of martial arts. Evidently, when it comes to being beaten by an intimate partner, smallish effete men need not apply. Rather than just a laughable irony created out of familiar inter-male competition, it is instead another fiction intended to underscore a political framework that needs to negate the actual evidence with a reversal: the paradox of men *proudly proclaiming their shame* existing as a simple sleight of hand intended to declare a lack of evidence damning women to be evidence in and of itself. If one points out that emotional abuse does not necessarily measure up to physical violence, whether nominal or life threatening, it is fairly easy for men to make accusations that they are being shamed or blamed for their own abuse, no matter its comparative tokenism.

Despite the numerous efforts made to massage facts and statistics into a more flattering shape, most of the contributors seem to have little idea how unsympathetic their anecdotes tend to render them. Even if they are correct and police do sometimes arrest male victims rather than helping them (something that has always happened to female victims and is increasingly on the rise due to contemporary efforts by men), the fact that nearly every primary-contributor to the website has been brought up on charges of violence himself should still give them pause to consider exactly what type of men BatteredMen.com is serving as a mouthpiece for. Primary-contributor, that is, in that nearly half of the anecdotes are supplied by third-parties (something which is almost never the case in resources for battered women) who seem less than credible themselves. After

all, if Eugene Brame can still speak publicly in defense of his son, ignoring evidence turned up after thousands of hours worth of research and investigation by police and journalists alike, all working to find the truth about David, it seems doubtful that the friends and relatives of men involved in similar cases that do not receive such treatment would remain any more objective.

In all likelihood, David Brame felt cornered, terrified, and battered the day that he turned his gun on his wife: he had decided that his own life was ruined, over, never mind that it was his own actions that had led him down that road. And like Rambo—hiding in that cave with bulging muscles and veins, crouched low with a long knife and a submachine gun, the brutal light of his torch flickering against their cold metal—there was a profound disconnect between his conception of a tortured inner identity as a victim and the external reality he presented the world. With men in our society becoming increasingly reliant on fiction to serve as a buffer for such disconnects, BatteredMen.com is itself a vestigial organ of the brief Mythopoetic movement of the 1990s which has long been superceded by more polished and less pretentious forms (cp. the wave of superhero films in the wake of September 11th), the gulf between what men feel and what they *are* is ever widening, increasingly losing touch with reality.

The Justice Department might be right in its statistic of 834,000 each year, only it could very well refer to the number of perpetrators of violence who are under the delusion that they are victims. No, perhaps not all the men in that number, but for men as a gender to flock to the stories of those rare cases, investing themselves utterly in exceptions to the rule—flights of fantasy ripped straight from the oeuvre of Michael Douglas—also does a disservice to men who truly are victims of domestic violence, who now have to share the title of “battered man” or “abused husband” with the likes of David Brame.