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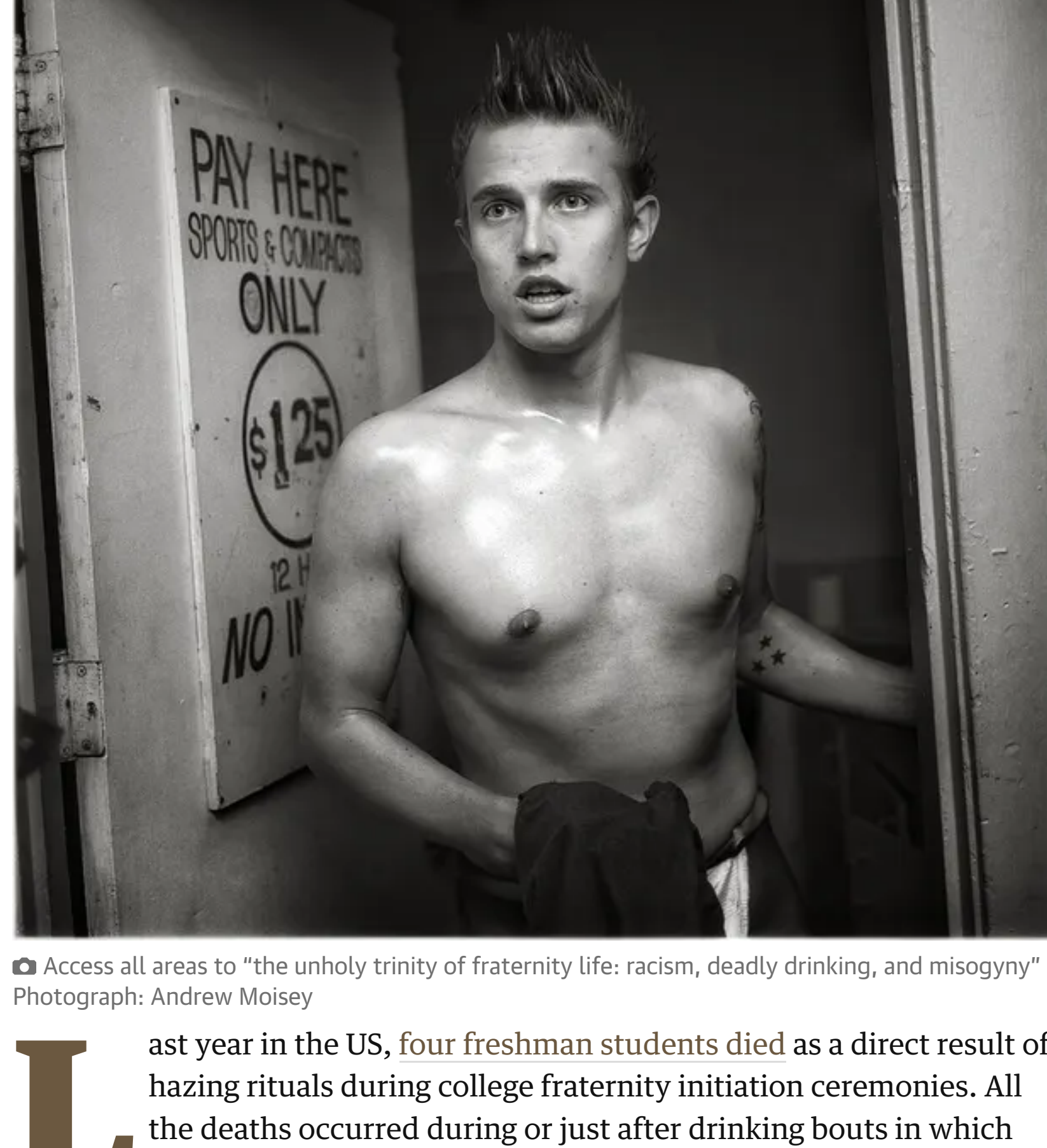
Photography

**Humiliation, homoeroticism and animal cruelty: inside the frat house**

Photographer Andrew Moisey uncovered ritual hazing, extreme drunkenness and toxic masculinity on one college campus - from men destined to be America's future leaders



Sean O'Hagan  
 Mon 10 Dec 2018 08:10 EST



Access all areas to "the unholy trinity of fraternity life: racism, deadly drinking, and misogyny"  
 Photograph: Andrew Moisey

Last year in the US, four freshman students died as a direct result of hazing rituals during college fraternity initiation ceremonies. All the deaths occurred during or just after drinking bouts in which the victims consumed vast amounts of spirits in a short space of time while older students egged them on. One of the deceased, Maxwell Gruver, 19, a student at Louisiana State University, was found to have had a blood-alcohol level over .49 g/dl at the time of his death - just .31 is considered life-threatening.

"Nobody can physically drink that much ... You have to be forced to drink it," his mother told ABC news. "It's senseless. I mean, how is making your brother do all these things, and humiliating somebody, a brotherhood?"

In his book *True Gentlemen: The Broken Pledge of America's Fraternities*, John Hechinger notes that around 100,000 young men choose to be initiated into chapters annually, despite these all-male societies now being associated with what he describes as "the unholy trinity of fraternity life: racism, deadly drinking and misogyny". Many of the young men they attract will go on to work in politics, finance and law-making, sometimes at the highest level. What's more, the loyalties formed will be maintained throughout a working life in which the male, white and privileged look out for each other whatever their transgressions. Hechinger cites a fraternity promotional video that promises students a lifelong bond with "the best and brightest men on campus. Men who will become the best men at your wedding, pallbearers at your funeral and everything in between."

**These guys consider themselves respectable, but their loyalty is such that they will protect the bad guys in their midst**

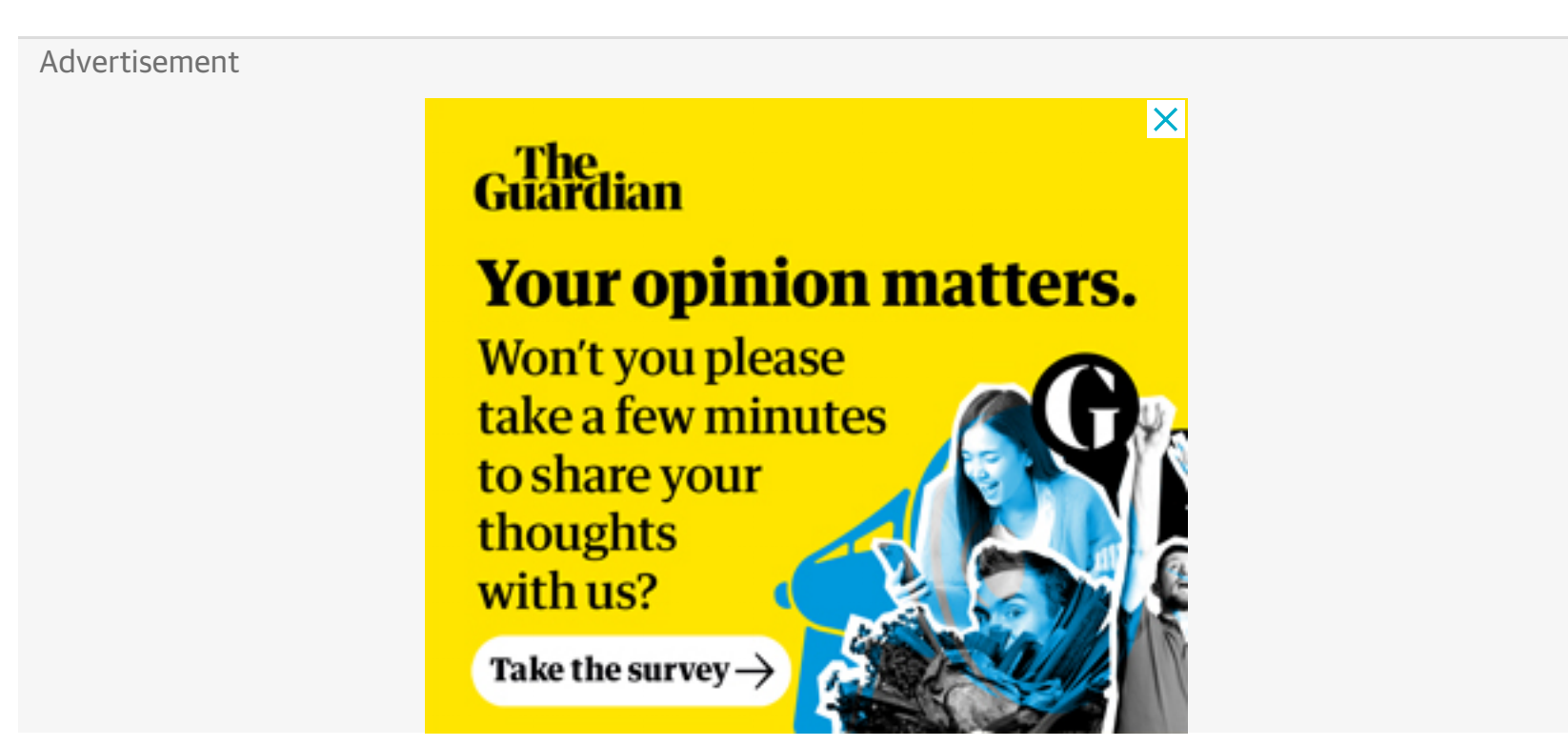
There is a funeral in Andrew Moisey's timely and provocative photobook, *The American Fraternity: An Illustrated Ritual Manual*, though it is unrelated to anything that happened on the campus of the unnamed university where the images were documented. It does, though, show young men looking awkwardly ill at ease as they attend the most serious ritual of all. Elsewhere, the same young men seem altogether more relaxed in a closed, all-male campus environment where heavy drinking, boorishness, bullying and misogyny are the norms. A

world in which homosexuality is taboo but cross-dressing and semi-naked wrestling are acceptable and parading your penis and testicles is almost de rigueur.



A world in which semi-naked wrestling is acceptable and parading your penis de rigueur  
 Photograph: Andrew Moisey

"I wanted to show how the whole brotherhood thing that fraternity houses are built on actually tends to bring out the worst in young men, and the lofty ideals that once informed the organisations have now been replaced by pretty dreadful behaviour," elaborates Moisey, who studied at Berkeley and now teaches at Cornell. "But I also wanted to get over the fact that, though these guys love to revel in their own debauchery, they don't think of themselves as bad people."



One writer describes the 'unholy trinity of fraternity life' as racism, deadly drinking and misogyny  
 Photograph: Andrew Moisey

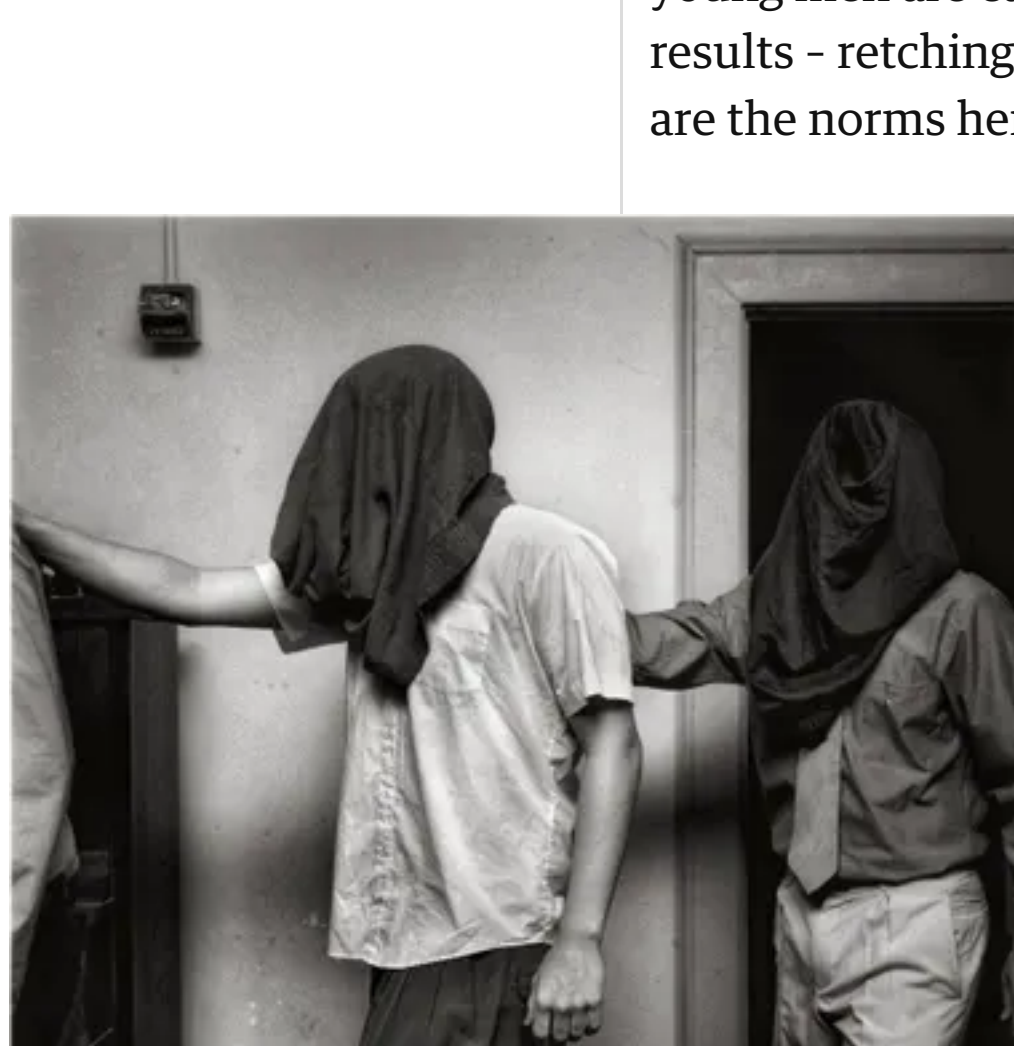
Moisey, whose older brother was a member of the frat house in the book, began photographing there in 2008, when George W Bush, "the ultimate frat guy", was president. "I was angry with Bush and the culture of white privilege that produced him and his values, but no one was that interested in the pictures. But now, suddenly it's 2018 and the temperature has changed."

The book offers an uncomfortable glimpse of an enclosed world whose ultra-macho values have been sanctioned by the election of bully-in-chief Donald Trump, and his subsequent endorsement of Supreme Court judge Brett Kavanaugh. Interestingly, of the 18 presidents listed as ex-fraternity members in the book - including Kennedy, Reagan, Clinton and Bush - Trump is conspicuous by his absence. Kavanaugh, though, is included on the corresponding list of Supreme Court judges, even though the book went to the printers before his controversial confirmation. "I took a calculated risk on that one and it paid off," says Moisey. "Out of a fraternity culture that protects bad seeds, one of the worst seeds gets elected to the Supreme Court."



The American Fraternity is a beautifully complex undertaking: the photobook as art object, conceptually mirroring an old fraternity handbook complete with pledges, prayers, vows and descriptions of the secretive rituals and rules that bind members for life. Hence images of excess and humiliation are contrasted with the grandly titled, quasi-Masonic ceremonies that lend contemporary fraternity houses a historical legitimacy: the Ritual of Initiation, the Libations, the Candle Ceremony, Duties of the Chapter Orders.

There are many disturbing visual echoes, including a grainy photograph of hooded inductees being humiliated that recalls images of prisoners being degraded at Abu Ghraib. Elsewhere, obviously distressed and inebriated young men are cajoled to drink more by older students with predictable results - retching, puking and unconsciousness. Aggression and humiliation are the norms here, the one driving the other.



This photograph of hooded inductees recalls images of prisoners being degraded at Abu Ghraib. Photograph: Andrew Moisey

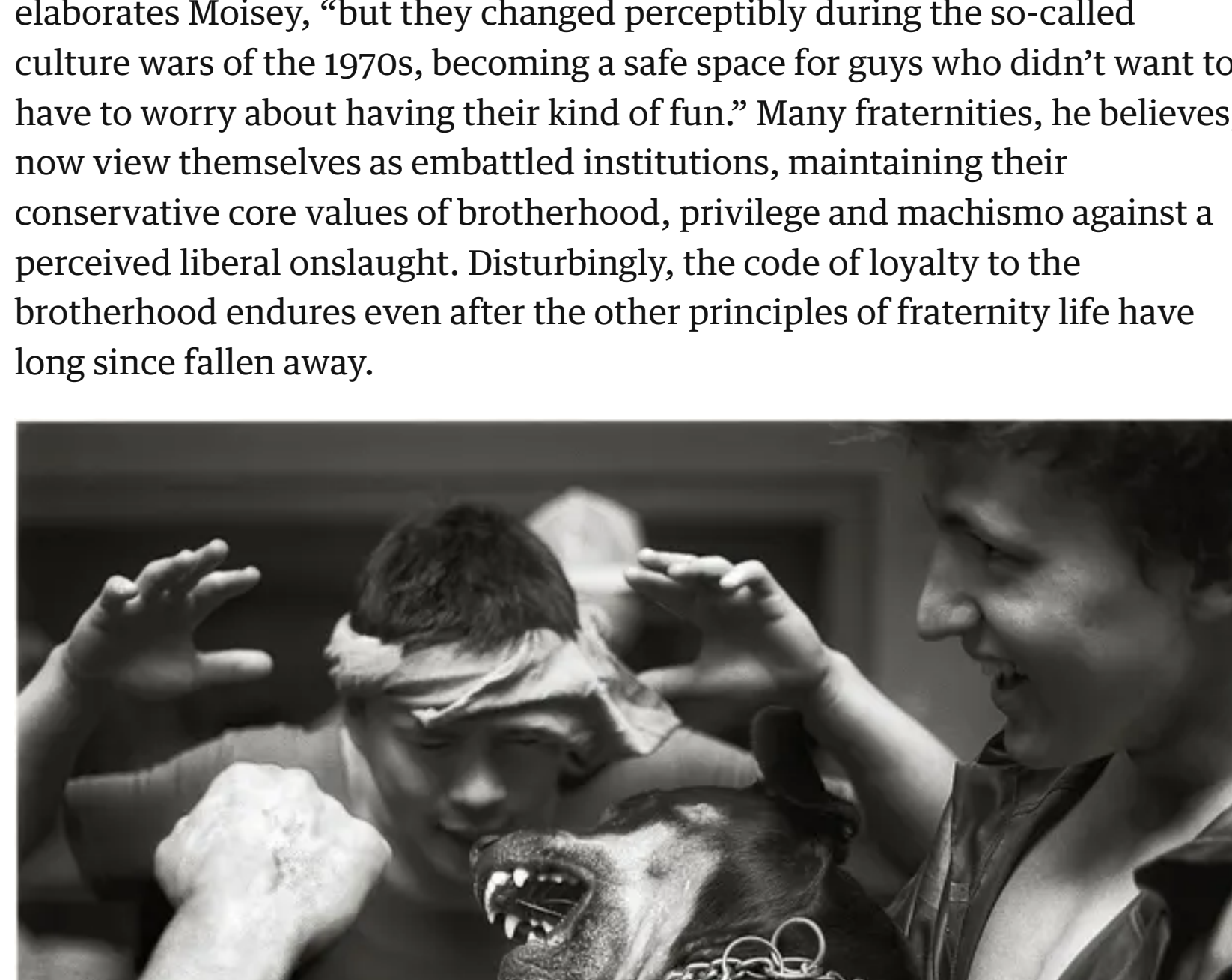
When young women appear in the photographs, the sense of danger is amplified. Some collude in the laddish behaviour, baring their breasts and appearing unconcerned about being groped and leered at. Others seem more uncertain, slightly spooked, yet they are there of their own volition despite the heightened atmosphere of male entitlement - even threat. One woman is photographed, fully clothed but passed out, legs apart, on a bed. It could be an aftermath photograph, or a warning of what might yet occur. Whichever, the image carries a disturbing charge, all the more so given the recent studies that have found that women in sororities are 74% more likely to be raped than other college women.

"Why are the girls there?" asks writer Cynthia Robinson in her edgy, questioning afterword. "Why did they go, why do they, to these parties where everyone knows what happens?" She then provides, from personal experience, an uncomfortable answer. "Let me tell you why, because I was there too. A sheltered southern girl eager to bust out. I was a frat-house regular by the end of my first semester. I passed out in frat houses too. Lots of girls did ... I was there because I wanted reassurance on a certain score: that I could be a certain thing, be a certain way. The girls in the images that comprise this book are there for the same reasons. They are there in order to reassure themselves, to perform for their peers, that they are desirable. Desired. This they want above all other things: to be desired."

**I was angry with George W Bush and the culture of white privilege that produced him. But no one was interested then ...**

Moisey's black and white photographs move from portraiture to reportage to a low-lit style that is close to surveillance photography - some rituals are carried out in candlelight. Throughout, he is a detached observer, showing the unruly ordinariness of all-male campus dorm life - untidy bedrooms, filthy kitchens, graffiti-scrawled doors - alongside the debauchery and excess. The fraternity even has a pet dog, which seems to roam freely through the rooms and, in one awful image, is held by one drunken guy while being punched by another. Everything, it seems, is permitted in pursuit of this almost feral male camaraderie.

"These all-male campus spaces have been around since the 1820s," elaborates Moisey, "but they changed perceptibly during the so-called culture wars of the 1970s, becoming a safe space for guys who didn't want to have to worry about having their kind of fun." Many fraternities, he believes, now view themselves as embattled institutions, maintaining their conservative core values of brotherhood, privilege and machismo against a perceived liberal onslaught. Disturbingly, the code of loyalty to the brotherhood endures even after the other principles of fraternity life have long since fallen away.



In one disturbing image, a dog is held by a drunken fratboy while being punched by another. Photograph: Andrew Moisey

"The central issue is that there is an allegiance to anyone inside the fraternity rather than to the higher ideal," says Moisey. "So even though most of these guys consider themselves highly respectable, their loyalty is such that they will protect the bad guys who hide in their midst. If you are a bad seed and you join a fraternity, you have found your safe haven. And what we are seeing right now is that the support and protection that fraternities provide for the bad seeds extends into the highest echelons of American power and decision-making."

The last image in the book shows a row of frat guys looking at a spread of Moisey's photographs. They seem unconcerned, even amused, by what they depict. "I didn't set out to expose them," says Moisey, "I just wanted to show what hadn't been shown before. And when I showed it to them, they were fine. As far as they are concerned, they're just ordinary American guys doing what ordinary American guys do at college."

Revealingly, though, when Moisey first exhibited the work in a small show in Berkeley, it was his artist's statement that drew the most media attention. It read: "This is what our leaders looked like when they were young."

The American Fraternity: An Illustrated Ritual Manual is published by Daylight

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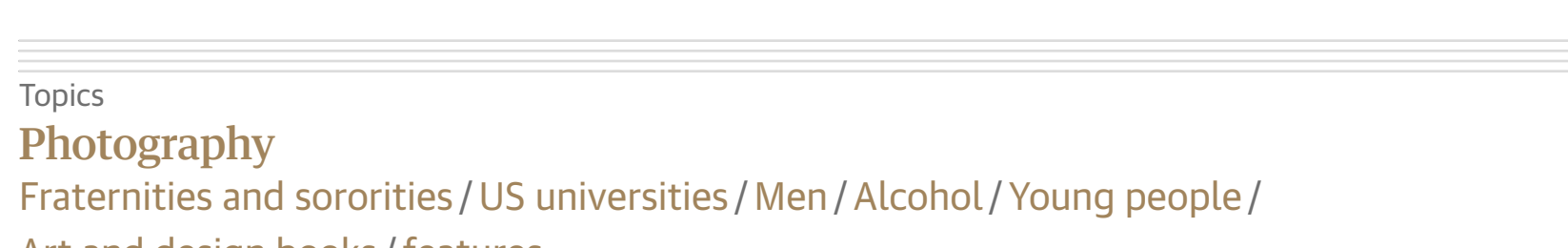
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