›Don't Retreat, Reload‹

Guns, Rugged Femininity, and Insurrection in Republican Women Candidates' 2022 Midterm Political Advertisements

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1. Introduction

In April 2022, former Alaska governor and vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin announced that she was running for Alaska's congressional seat, officially marking her return on the national political scene after a leave of thirteen years. In a statement released on her Twitter account, she depicted a nation in deep crisis, victimized by the »radical left« and its »America-last agenda«. She seemingly could not just stand by and needed to intervene: »America is at a tipping point. As I've watched the far left destroy the country, I knew I had to step up and join the fight« (Palin 04/02/2022). In the following months, Palin doubled down on the belligerent rhetoric in the political advertisements uploaded on her YouTube account. In an ad entitled »Girl Power!«, Palin appears in a quirky montage in various outfits and stances. She is, for instance, shown opposed to Democratic women accusingly pointing fingers or superposed onto an opaque US American flag waving in the wind – all playing out over a pastel pink background. The tone is playful, the pictures quickly pop up, slide up and down, and pop right out, and the upbeat music is, at times, interrupted by zany sound effects, like theatrical punches, a boxing bell, and a bald eagle screech. The voice-over is narrated by a young girl, who describes Palin as a »smart… fierce… patriot« and a »fighter… who stands up against the liberal left« and »who doesn't blink when the going gets tough« (Palin 10/17/2022 00:13–00:15; 00:03–00:10). She also tells us that »Sarah Palin isn't fueled by special interests; she runs on girl power« and that »she'll never back down… because you don't mess with a mama grizzly« (00:16–00:21; 00:24–00:29). A second ad, »Sarah Palin for Alaska«, is more somber in tone as a male narrator dramatically decries the demise of the nation and the lack of leadership in the US government, »until now« (Palin 08/01/20 22:00:18). The ad, which plays like a blockbuster film trailer, introduces Palin as a savior and backup, with pictures of the candidate solemnly smiling and looking ahead, a US flag waving in the background, and an uplifting piano song playing over, em-

phasizing the sense of hope and change conjured by the ad. This photo montage is at times interrupted by segments of a speech Palin delivered at a rally for Donald J. Trump in Anchorage, AK, in July 2022, signaling here clearly to her viewers her allegiance to the former US president and his MAGA movement. In the extracts, she announces that she is »running because the good guys already serving in office, they need reinforcements« (00:44–00:49). Electrified by the cheering crowd, she insists that she will not just »fight even harder for Alaska's interests« but that she intends to »save this country« (00:19–00:24). To underscore her message, she delivers one of her infamous slogans, which is also the title for this contribution: »Don't retreat, reload« (00:35–00:37). One year after the January 6th, 2021, right-wing insurrection at the US Capitol, »Don't retreat, reload« taps in a discourse of national crisis and rightful insurgency. It encourages voters to take up arms and revolt – with their votes, but also, seemingly, their guns.[1] Taken together, the language, imagery, and tone of Palin's two ads are intriguing because they fuse (armed) insurrection with female empowerment to legitimize the political power, authority, and credibility of a female political candidate. As a trailblazer for conservative women's political participation and a precursor to Trump's type of conservatism, Sarah Palin's political brand was originally built around conservative feminism and especially a rhetoric of motherhood that rested on a set of useful metaphors: She often referred to herself as a ›hockey mom‹ and compared conservative women like her to »mama grizzly bears that rise up on their hind legs when somebody's coming to attack their cubs« (Pilkington 2010). The fact that Palin – probably one of the most popular reactionary Republican female politicians of the 21st century – decided to make a comeback in 2022 is also, I think, revealing of the current political mood, in which right-wing populist, anti-government, and ›civil war‹ rhetoric and imagery are flourishing and spilling well beyond the limits of far-right media and groups.

This article examines the representations and functions of gun-womanship in Republican women candidates' political advertisements during the 2022 US midterm elections.[2] More precisely, it questions the »cultural work« (Tompkins

1 To be sure, this insurrectionist rhetoric is not new. In 2010, for instance, Sharron Angle, another Tea Party-affiliated Republican female candidate to the Senate, sparked outrage during her campaign when she suggested that Congress might need »Second Amendment remedies« (Jaffe 2010). Similarly, in 2016, Donald J. Trump told a crowd at one of his campaign rallies in Wilmington, N.C., that »Second Amendment people« could take actions against Hillary Clinton if she were to be elected president and impose stricter gun laws (Corasaniti/Haberman 2016).

2 While I speak of Republican women throughout this article, I do not aim to homogenize this diverse group. I realize that there are important differences demarcating each female politician, particularly in terms of ideology but also of generation, geography, religion, race and ethnicity, and class, among other factors. Nonetheless, the candidates I analyze here share important traits: They all adhere to conservatism (traditional gender roles and family values,

1986) that these shooting female fighter-politicians perform in contemporary US culture and politics in times of hyper-partisanship and -polarization. This article uncovers the meaningful patterns related to gender, race, citizenship, and nationhood deployed, reinforced, and/or contested in Republican political communication. Through the concept of (White) rugged femininity, I emphasize the complex gendered identity that Republican women perform in their political ads. This identity, I argue, rests on the reproduction of traditional gender norms and family values, rugged individualism, and US cultural scripts, and, in particular, Western expansion mythologies – of law and order, the gunfighter nation, and what American studies scholar Richard Slotkin has called »regeneration through violence« (book of the same title) – and masculine icons of the Wild West, like the cowboy, sheriff, and vigilante. Rugged femininity is pertinent in the case of Republican women's communication because female candidates need to fit the gender expectations of their party to appear legitimate to their electorate and male peers, while at the same time necessarily challenging them. In usually less than a minute, campaign ads need to clearly communicate that female candidates are tough and able to ›fight‹ for their country, that they are caring and motherly (»mom« and »mother« are recurring certifications in the ads I analyze), and that they are (extra-)conservative. The gun, prominently displayed and/or fired, is deployed to emphasize and interlink these traits. This article thus draws attention to the ways firearms in Republican women's political ads have a complex, if not contradictory, function: They at once challenge and reshuffle the patriarchal structures and politics of the GOP by signaling that women can hold the same guns and therefore the same offices as their male colleagues, but they also fortify masculinist ideals and expectations of political power, womanhood, and US citizenship, based on an assertion and performance of (armed) authority, strength, and violence.

Following an approach of ideology critique, this article examines closely the discursive and visual constructions of the armed (and, at times, shooting) Republican woman politician through an analysis of the TV and digital political advertising candidates produced and circulated during the 2022 election cycle. In terms of selection, I have chosen political ads that discuss and display firearms (in particular, handguns, shotguns, hunting rifles, semi-automatic rifles, and military-style assault weapons). I focus on the ads of new candidates, like Mallory Staples (GA-06) and Esther Joy King (IL-17), as well as representatives up for reelection, like Marjorie Taylor Greene (GA-14) and Lauren Boebert (CO-03), who first assumed office in

free market, *laissez-faire* politics), work with key Republican issues, and have identified as White (except for Anna Paulina Luna, Florida's 13th Congressional District candidate, who has identified as White/Latina). Most have also pledged allegiance to or been endorsed by former President Donald J. Trump during their campaigns (thus, they can also be considered ›pro-Trump‹).

Congress in January 2021. First, I will provide a brief overview of the role of women politicians in the Republican Party and the impact of political advertisements in their political communication, contending that guns often make an appearance and represent both a masculine tool of power and a mark of conservative political credibility. Second, I will conduct a close reading of selected ads, suggesting that candidates rest on the performance of (White) rugged femininity through their appeal to US foundational myths and use of feminist discourse, specially of female empowerment, to advocate for the extension of (militarized) state power and neoliberal capitalism. Third, I will close this article with a discussion on the implications of the militantism and para-militarization of the Republican party that has risen in the past years, especially following Trump's presidency.

2. Gunning for Congress: Women of the Republican Party, Political Advertisements, and Guns

The 2022 US midterm elections marked a political turn for the Republican Party, with 42 female candidates winning seats in the House of Representatives (33) and the Senate (9) – a record number for the party (Center for American Women and Politics [CAWP] 2022). There had been 299 Republican women candidates running for Congress, with 38 filled candidacies for Senate and 261 for the House of Representatives (an increase from 2020, with 23 filled candidacies for Senate and 227 for the House) (CAWP n.d.).[3] As of January 2023, Republican women represent 28 percent of all female members and 15.5 percent of all Republican members of the 118th Congress. In comparison, Democratic women currently hold 106 seats in Congress and represent 40.8 percent of Democrat members (Dittmar 2022), which reflects a stark (partisan) gender gap in Congress. As political scientist Kira Sanbonmatsu reminds us, there is also an important »gender gap [that] persists in the electorate in which women voters are more likely than men to prefer Democratic over Republican candidates« (2018: xiv).

Long designated by political pundits as a political party waging ›war on women‹ the GOP has, in the last decade, tried to appear more attractive to women and to recruit them amongst its ranks – both as voters and as officeholders. It has attempted to counter this deficit of women candidates and its image problem with women through the creation of political action committees, such as Project *GROW* (*Growing Republican Opportunities for Women*), *View PAC*, *RightNOW Women PAC*, *Susan B.*

3 These numbers do not include state legislature, in which a total of 1812 Republican women ran in 2022 (an increase from 1407 in 2020) and 1291 were nominated (compared to 1105 in 2020) (CAWP n.d.).

Anthony List, and *Maggie's List*, among others, that aim to support female Republican candidates in their political campaigns and, more broadly, to galvanize women to participate further in the party's politics. Despite consequential gains, and especially in 2020 when Republican women outpaced Democratic women's electoral wins, they continue to be the minority of women and of Republican members in Congress, and parity with men, in terms of candidacy and officeholding representation, remains unachieved.[4]

During their campaigns and incumbencies, Republican women need not only to negotiate male-dominated political institutions, but also their own party's rooted patriarchal culture and expectations (Dittmar 2015; Deckman 2016; Wineinger 2018). In a 2020 study for the *Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP)* that examines the role of gender and gender stereotypes in US electoral campaigns, political scientist Kelly Dittmar argues that there are »dual demands that women candidates face to meet stereotypical expectations of both candidacy, which continue to align most often with men and masculinity, and their gender – which assume alignment with norms of femininity«. To match the stereotypically masculine expectations that the public associates with political leadership (see, for instance, Huddy/Terkildsen 1993; Lawless 2004), Republican women candidates often perform a »hegemonic masculinity« (Connell 1987), putting special emphasis on their (physical and moral) strength, authority, and entrepreneurship. At the same time, and supposedly so as to not alienate a conservative electorate that continues to believe strongly in traditional gender roles and hierarchies, they need to fit gendered norms and expectations and assert typical feminine traits, often through their appearances, behavior, and actions, as well as through a rhetoric of motherhood and care. This paradox manifests itself in stark ways in the political advertisements produced by and for Republican women candidates.

Political advertising, part of electoral campaigns since the beginning of federal elections (Thurber et al. 2001), continues to play a central role in the electoral process in the United States. Through newspapers and pamphlets, then the radio, television, and now the Internet (especially, via interactive social media platforms, like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook), candidates have sought to inform, appeal, and convince voters about their convictions, core values, and their capacity to govern. Political ads are also important affective tools that can influence viewers' perception of candidates (and their opponents), shape their impressions of a party and their understanding of key state or national issues, often by eliciting particular affective states and emotions, like fear, anxiety, enthusiasm, hope, etc. (Brader 2001; 2005). While there is a considerable amount of research done on the effectiveness and prevalence

4 Quite a lot has been written about this consistent under-representation of Republican women in Congress. For more on this topic, see Thomsen (2015); Kitchens/Swers (2016); Crowder-Meyer/Cooperman (2018); Och/Shames (2018).

of political advertising to sway voters (see, for instance, Kahn/Geer 1994; Valentino et al. 2004; Kaid et al. 2011), I am less interested in their impact than in their construction. Indeed, political ads function as powerful ideological sites that can suggest compelling and affective narratives to viewers, for them to make sense of their social environment and to galvanize them to the voting booths. In often less than a minute, they tend to negotiate complex societal issues, like (individual and collective) identity, race, gender, class, citizenship, and power, and can reconfigure their meanings in striking visual terms. Interestingly, political ads often rest on popular genres and shared cultural scripts to appeal to voters and to generate public attention, quantified in terms of views and mentions. As political scientist David Schultz argues, »[p]olitics is thus in competition with the rest of popular culture for the attention of the American voter. It is a noisy, crowded competition, necessitating that candidates often ape themes from pop culture in order to cut through the crowd« (2004: xi).

The 2022 election cycle, branded as a major political event with cataclysmic consequences by both parties, broke records in terms of political advertising spending, reaching close to ten billion dollars (Gabbatt 2022). Clearly, political ads continue to be valued by politicians as an effective mean to connect with their audience and to stage themselves and their party's political positions. During this election cycle, Republican ads focused mainly on conservative hot button issues, such as COVID-19 measures, inflation and taxation, immigration, crime, and the so-called liberal culture war on US American values (denouncing, for instance, affirmative action policies, the supposed teaching of critical race theory in schools, the expansion of LGBTQ+ rights, etc.). Perhaps revealing of the current political climate, more than 100 ads by Republican (male and female) candidates featured and/or mentioned guns (Glueck et al. 2022).

This is not the first electoral cycle in which candidates, and in particular conservative ones, include firearms in their political ads. A 2018 report by the Wesleyan Media Project observed that references to guns in political ads by federal and gubernatorial candidates are increasing over time (from 1 percent of all ads in 2012 to 11.5 percent in 2018) and are, therefore, progressively being normalized in US political communication. Guns and gun imagery in Republican political ads can represent various things at once: They can signal a commitment to Second Amendment rights and a stark opposition to gun control policies, they can be sensational props used to captivate the public's attention and to gain precious visibility in a competitive election cycle, and they can instantly testify to a conservative political identity, conjuring up shared US cultural scripts and myths, particularly of the Wild West and the frontier – »the longest-lived of American myths« according to Richard Slotkin (1998: 15). As communication studies scholars Ryan Neville-Shepard and Casey Ryan Kelly have argued in their work on Republican men's use of guns in campaign advertising, they can also »evok[e] violence against government, established order, and the legal pro-

cess that has made political and social change possible« (2020: 467). For the authors, guns in ads participate in a »spectacle of violence« that displays and justifies »White masculine identity politics« and patriarchy (2020: 469). As (gendered and racialized) symbolic and political objects steeped in, if not defining of, a foundational national mythology that continues to enact powerful cultural work in US society, guns have unsurprisingly made their appearance in Republican women candidates' political ads during the 2022 midterm elections.

3. Pearls, Pumps, and Pistols: Rugged Femininity in Republican Women Candidates' Political Ads

There are many ways in which guns are used in Republican women's political ads: They might be displayed as accessories, shown in the biographical slideshow of a candidate (particularly when she has served in the military), or used in action, for instance, at a shooting range, on a hunting land, field or garden. Candidates often follow popular scripts and generic patterns as they choose to carry firearms in their ads to appeal to their constituencies. Specifically, Republican women appear to perform a particular gendered identity to legitimate their political authority and power in what I would call ›rugged femininity‹. Rugged femininity encapsulates aspects of a traditionally hegemonic masculinity, rugged individualism, ›traditional‹ feminine traits (and, especially, motherhood and domesticity), and rests prominently on national gun mythologies and iconography. This complex gendered performance appears in two ways in Republican women candidates' ads.

First, Republican female candidates tend to appeal to a key cultural script of ›Americanness‹ and a core US foundational myth: the US American West. Their political ads often include the rhetoric and iconography of the frontier, and they tend to fashion themselves as masculinist, individualist, rural, classical Western heroes. Whether candidates are mimicking the cowboy, the sheriff, or the vigilante, what seems to matter is that they take on the role of a (violent) authority figure the public can recognize. This is done through a discourse of law and order, the opposition between rural authenticity and righteousness versus urban corruption and frivolity, and references to a form of social, moral, or political regeneration that presupposes acts of (symbolic or real) violence – what Richard Slotkin has called the »myth of regeneration through violence«.[5] Often, female candidates set their ads in emptied

5 In *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973: 5), Slotkin argues that violence played a defining role in the emergence of the US nation-state and describes the myth of regeneration through violence as »the structuring metaphor of the American experience«. He analyzes the creation and development of this myth in early American literature from the 17th to the 19th century. He examines, for instance, the »myth of the hunter« embodied by iconic figures like Daniel Boone and James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo, as »one of self-renewal or

landscapes like fields, paths, shooting ranges, and even cities, in which they are the only object of attention. The effect is interesting when considering the notion of rugged femininity because in those spaces, candidates are not only sole object of attention, but they are also sole figure of authority.[6] These emptied landscapes possibly allude to national mythologies, like the (emptied) frontier and its vastness, symbolic of self-reliance and solitude, freedom and opportunity, and signal a field of possibility in terms of social order. Furthermore, candidates rest on a rugged masculinity dress code that might include blue jeans, buckle belts, (leather) jackets, and behaviors such as tough-looking poses, usually with muscles and guns put in evidence. At the same time, this masculine representation of authority and power is often counterbalanced by references and appeals to dominant constructions of femininity, particularly based on a rhetoric of motherhood, care, and domesticity, and a play on the »seductive fantasy« of the armed, fierce woman (Browder 2006: 13).

In an ad called »Mallory Staples: MAGA Mom«, the candidate for Georgia's 6th District introduces herself as she descends the stairs of what appears to be her home: »I'm Mallory Staples, I'm a mom, and as my family can tell you, I won't put up with what the left is trying to do to our country« (01/27/2022 00:00–00:06). These introductory lines set the tone for the rest of the ad. Staples presents herself as a mother and, therefore, a tough dedicated Republican politician. The ad is punctuated by a quick, energetic music that, at times, stops abruptly for dramatic effects when Staples delivers a punchy statement. Throughout the video, the candidate invokes a set of narratives typically promoted by the Republican party, such as the so-called liberal indoctrination in education, a consistent loss of freedom, and the demise of religion at the hands of a Democratic government. »They want to indoctrinate our kids in school, replace our faith with fear, and mandate how we live«, Staples deplores, before defiantly adding, »Biden and the Democrats want to shut us down and shut us up; I'm a MAGA mom, I don't shut up and I won't sit on the sidelines« (00:07–00:20). While the ad begins inside an immaculate upper-class home, with her sons doing their homework on the kitchen's counter table and reciting Abraham Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* (»government of the people, by the people«), we then follow her outside through what appears to be her estate, first crossing the framework of a house in construction and then riding a horse on a bridle path. Staples performs a rugged femininity when she, for instance, displays her carefully blowout blond

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self-creation through violence« (1973: 556): The Western hero begins in a state of innocence and purity but is brought to extreme violence by corruptive forces (often embodied by the so-called wilderness of the American continent and its native inhabitants), which will result »in a figurative rebirth, the attainment of a new soul« (1973: 101). For Slotkin, the myth of regeneration through violence expands to US American society and culture, and popular cultural texts have long embraced the topos.

6 Thanks to Sarah Marak and Kerstin Schuster for pointing this out.

hair, wears a khaki leather jacket, blue jeans, brown boots, and pearl earrings while riding the horse in a powerful pose. She stares straight in the camera and states her plan of attack: »I'm going to put an end to the lies and the lockdowns, stop the illegals, ban CRT [Critical Race Theory], and fight vaccine mandates« (00:43–00:48). In brief, she tells us that the sheriff has arrived in town and that she will, if elected, take strong actions against a government that is supposedly encroaching her constituencies' freedoms. The following scene is as telling of the role she aims to play: The camera is locked in a close-up of her hands on the grip and fore stock of a pump-action shotgun (also known as a ›riot shotgun‹) – nails freshly French-manicured. The music stops, Staples pulls back on the forearm, cocks the hammer of the gun, and solemnly claims: »I'll make sure we always have the right to protect ourselves; and our families« (00:49–00:53). Republican candidate Mallory Staples locks eyes with the audience and ensures them, shotgun in hand, that she will protect their Second Amendment right. As the camera pans, mother and children raise in synchronization their weapons at an imaginary enemy ahead of them. Visually striking here, rugged femininity ensures the reproduction of the gunslinger nation (see fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Stills from Staples's compaign spot
»Mallory Staples: MAGA Mom« (00:50; 00:53)

Seemingly embodying Sarah Palin's ethos of ›mama grizzly‹, Staples performs in her ad an armed and militant »Republican motherhood« (Kerber 1980). In this choreographed staging of (White) ideal feminine domesticity, the mother has borne armed citizens and secured the reproduction of the gunfighter nation. The gun – and the mimicked gesture of brandishing it – binds mother and children in their imagined role of ideal self-defending and ready-to-act citizens. It is, furthermore, interesting to note that Staples chose to present herself in her home, emphasizing the idealization of the domestic space as a site of self-realization (remember that she is »Mallory Staples« and that she is »a MAGA mom«) but also of empowerment, as she is ready to defend her home against potential threats. The ad closes on Staples stating that »now is the time, it's time to step up, to step into the arena«, while opening the door of a van for her children to jump into. The leather jacket, the guns, and

the dominant attitude have been replaced by a warm light, a soft-pink down jacket, and smiles.

Second, and connected to the frontier and pioneer rhetoric, rugged femininity rests on a gendered reinterpretation of rugged individualism (the capacity for self-determination and self-making it promises often being understood to be usually available to men). Many Republican women candidates champion rugged individualism in their ads, mentioning self-determination, individual rights and freedoms, and entrepreneurship and describing their own successes (or hardships) in politics, in business, or at home. Their embrace of rugged individualism, which abominates state intervention, communicates awkwardly in their political ads, since they are, after all, running for office. Republican women candidates present themselves as staunchly patriotic and devoted to the nation, yet, in concordance with New Right discourses that reject federal and welfare-state power, they also tend to use a right-wing populist rhetoric, which casts the state as invasive, controlling, and corrupted. Republican women candidates, through their performance of armed rugged femininity, not only defend conservative, masculinist, and capitalist values but also participate in the extension of neoliberal state power (for example, in a rhetoric of national security and defense, through legal and regulatory intensifications, corporate expansion, privatization, etc.). Therefore, their discourse of limited government and individualism does not obstruct state power; it solely erodes its accountability to the public (Anker 2014).

In an ad published on her Twitter account one day after assuming office on January 3, 2021, representative Lauren Boebert (CO-03) exemplifies several traits of rugged femininity, such as the emphasis on (armed) self-determination and the reliance on a rhetoric of motherhood. Although not produced for the 2022 midterms per se, I argue that the following ad carefully constructs Boebert's main brand of Second Amendment ›protectress‹ that resonated during her bid for re-election.[7] The ad opens on a fake political ad in which the candidate states into the camera, smiling: »I'm Lauren Boebert and I approve this message« (Boebert 01/04/2021 00:01–00:03). Someone in the background shouts »cut« and the green screen disappears, letting the audience in on the backstage of the ad. A camera zooms in on Boebert as she loads a handgun in a determining and precisely choreographed way, before placing it in a leather holder at her hip. At the same moment, an energetic upbeat song begins as if to emphasize the supposed ›bad ass‹ character of the scene

7 Part of this tactical branding includes media posts of her and her family holding firearms and references to the fact that she used to own a gun-themed restaurant called »Shooters Grill« in Rifle, CO. She also often cites her comeback to rebuke Democrat Beto O'Rourke's gun control remarks, whom she confronted in Aurora, CO, in 2019 by telling him: »I was one of the gun owning Americans who heard you speak regarding your ›Hell yes I'm going to take your AR-15s and AK-47s. Well, I'm here to say hell no you're not‹« (CBS News Colorado 2019).

we just witnessed. For the rest of the video, we follow Boebert as she walks fast-paced in high-heeled pumps through the emptied streets of Capitol Hill, Washington D.C., and provides arguments on why she is determined to carry her gun in congressional office buildings. Stressing on individual self-determination, she proudly claims: »I refuse to give up my rights, especially my Second Amendment rights. I will carry my firearm in DC and in Congress« (00:25–00:38). Efforts to regulate access to guns are, indeed, often framed in Republican ads in terms of existential threats to individual citizens, infringing on their freedoms and their pursuit of self-realization. In this context, Republican women candidates have deployed feminist arguments of gender equality and female empowerment to legitimize gun-ownership and armed self-defense as a constitutional right of citizenship and a mean towards self-determination. According to sociologist Jennifer Carlson,

> [t]he image of female frailty colors pro-gun discourse. The pro-gun lobby supports women's armed self-defense on the premise that women are incomplete and utterly vulnerable without guns. This is illustrated in the widespread narrative that dramatizes the gun as the solution to women's physical vulnerability to men: guns are figured as the »great equalizer« that put 100-pound women on the same footing as 200-pound rapists, muggers, and murderers. (Carlson 2014: 370–1)

Carlson's comment about guns as »great equalizers« is relevant when considering the role of firearms in Republican women candidates' ads because their performance of rugged femininity, which importantly rest on the touting of a gun, communicates to their audience that they are not only physically strong but also politically capable.

In Boebert's ad, rugged femininity fuses rugged individualism with ideals of femininity, specifically as it relates to motherhood and female fragility. Indeed, one of the reasons for which Boebert sees it imperative to openly carry her gun at work is that she is a »woman and a mother of four« and that she wants to protect herself and her »family with all the force the constitution provides« (01:02–01:07). As she delivers her line, a sentimental montage of Boebert's family portraits and the phrase »DEFEND MY FAMILY« surrounds her. Boebert goes on to paint a grim picture of Washington D.C., arguing that it is »one of the top ten most dangerous cities in our country« with »homicides rates and violent crimes… skyrocketing here« and is, therefore, not a safe place for a woman (01:09–01:16). »I walk to my office every morning by myself, so as a five-foot tall, one hundred-pound woman«, she continues, »I choose to protect myself legally because *I am my best security*« (01:26–01:35, emphasis mine). Boebert's assertion that her gun represents an efficient, legal mean of defense against potential threats finds resonance in a discourse of neoliberal rugged individualism, that demands that individuals be solely responsible for their bodily, social, and economic security. Self-defense can only be done through guns, and Boe-

bert is fused with hers: Through special effects mimicking a scanner view, the audience is offered a peep of Rep. Lauren Boebert's CGI concealed handgun. The phrase »I AM MY BEST SECURITY« is being formed in the background (fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Bobert with transparent gun
Boebert, »Let me tell you why…« (01:33)

The discourse of neoliberal individualism and self-reliance promoted by Boebert extends to self-defense and motherly protection, which can only be afforded by a firearm. The ad advances a discourse of responsibilization and private policing that is steeped in feminist rhetoric: Here, it is not the US government that defend women against aggressors, it is women with guns who do. In the rhetoric of rugged femininity, there is thus a refusal to depend on others for defense (especially on the state) and an emphasis on self-sufficiency, perseverance, as well as patriotism. The gun, through the independence it promises to offer its bearer, is depicted by Boebert as a material expression (and perhaps, expansion) of ›Americanness.‹ She confides in her audience: »[p]eople here [in Washington D.C.] don't understand how we live in real America. The Second Amendment is part of our lives. Gun ownership is cherished and it makes our little towns safer« (01:39–01:46). The reference to ›real America‹ – possibly a nod to Sarah Palin who used the phrase in 2008 to describe US small-towns – romanticizes rural peoples and spaces as authentic, and the plural first-person pronoun ›we‹ binds Boebert and her audience in an imagined (armed) community of righteous and ideal rural citizens.

4. »Battle-Ready« Female Fighters: Insurgency in Republican Women Candidates' Ads

While guns have long been used as props in conservative political ads to communicate Republican values and the party's anti-gun control stance, there seems to be a current shift in their deployment. Guns are not only used as symbols of toughness, order, and ›Americanness,‹ they are also used as a political message to both sympathizers (to take up arms if needed) and opponents (to back off with gun control regulations). Indeed, they indicate the potential of a looming violent disruption, that has been framed as a ›(Second) civil war‹ in right-wing circles, and a readiness to combat that could overturn the current social and political order. Additionally, the rugged femininity deployed in Republican women political ads connects importantly to the US national icon of the lone vigilante. In an article entitled »Myths of Violence in American Popular Culture« (1975), literary studies scholar John Cawelti analyzes the vigilante as an archetype of US literature, a figure that is required to step in to protect the victimized and innocents when the state cannot do so anymore. Vigilante violence, according to Cawelti, stands for private security and is legitimized by a moral righteousness that opposes a necessary, just violence enacted by the hero vigilante against a gratuitous, nonsensical violence carried out by enemies.[8]

The trope of the vigilante appears in Republican women's political ads, for instance, in the militant rhetoric and the (para-)military imagery used – from the types of weapons fired (often automatic or semi-automatic guns) and vehicles (Humvees, Jeeps, or helicopters) to the outfits worn (cameo-prints and khaki reminiscent of the military uniform). Republican women candidates who use guns in their ads often do so to fashion themselves as modern vigilante, rebel ›fighters‹, and (para-)military ›pioneers‹, capable of defending themselves, their families, and, if elected, the nation.[9] While sport and war metaphors have long been used in political rhetoric, with, for instance, women candidates depicting themselves as

8 Cawelti perceptively noted the implication of vigilante violence in terms of class, writing that »the unrestrained use of personal and community security forces [embodied in the myth of the vigilante] has always played a significant role in protecting the American upper classes in their walled-off estates and housing developments« (1975: 534).

9 Many Republican women candidates, in fact, boast their military background in their political ads. This is the case for Rep. Jen Kiggans (VA-02), who in her campaign ad »The Difference«, is described by the narrator as a »navy pilot, nurse practitioner, and mom« (Kiggans 10/24/2022 00:02–00:04). Likewise, Jennifer Ruth-Green (IN-01), whose unofficial campaign slogan was »battle-proven leadership«, introduces herself in one of her ads as »not just a pilot or a combat veteran« but also »a proud conservative« who will »defend [in Congress] the 2nd amendment, protect life, and advance President Trump's America First policies«, it is implied like she »defended our country in combat, running counter-intelligence operations in Iraq« (Green 10/19/2022 00:01–00:04; 00:21–00:27; 00:17–00-21).

›fighters‹ or ›warriors‹ in their campaign ads,[10] there seems to be a new dimension to this rhetoric in the post January 6 context. Candidates (male and female) for Congress, have framed, using a language of urgency and imminent threat, the 2022 elections as a turning point in US history, one that will be defining for the future of the nation.

In an ad called »Battle Ready Leadership«, candidate Esther Joy King (IL-17) can be heard talking over a montage of nostalgic clichés of rural small-town life, that includes aestheticized pictures of barns and lush green fields, factory workers and farmers, US flags on porches, flying in the wind, etc. As she narrates a story of rural authenticity and producerism, violins are playing in the background, soft at first, they are slowly building up until King proclaims herself »battle-ready for the fight of a generation« (King 01/04/2022 00:32). To emphasize her message and her militarized strength, she appears wearing an army uniform in front of a flying US American flag. Their seeming fusion conveys the notion that King, with her rural and military background, truly embodies an Ur-›Americanness.‹ Furthermore, the low angle shot in which the scene is filmed produces a particular power dynamic between the candidate and her audience, as it makes King look dominant and powerful. Further in the ad, King elaborates on the upcoming battle she is ready to face: »It's socialism against freedom. It's barely surviving versus boldly succeeding. Under leftists' control, we are less free.… The battle for the direction of our country is here. So, if you're ready to defend America, come, join me. Let's go« (00:35–00:43; 01:04–01:13). Here, the candidate fashions herself as a soldier-politician, apt at using military-style assault weapons, and ready to win the war against the ›left.‹: A still demonstrates the candidate's shooting skills as she fires an AR-15-style rifle at an empty shooting range (see fig. 3). Her final address to her audience, the motivational »let's go«, seems to actively engage her constituencies in the fight she builds up throughout the ad.

10 Examples are quite abundant here, and from both sides of the political spectrum. Hillary Clinton, for instance, ran a political ad during her presidential bid in 2015 entitled »Fighter« (Clinton 06/12/2015) and so did Elizabeth Warren in 2020 (Warren 02/21/2020). On the Republican side, Martha McSally (AZ-02), who served in the US Air Force, ran in 2020 an ad called »Your Fighter«, in which she is shown boarding a fighter jet in slow motion while announcing: »if you want a fighter, I'm your girl« (McSally 09/21/2020 00:27–00:29). More recently, candidate and »air force veteran« Anna Paulina Luna (FL-13), used in one of her ads quotes by President Donald J. Trump calling her a »warrior«, a »winner«, and ready to »fight the liberals« and displayed photos of herself in military uniform and with military-style weapons (Luna 08/11/2022 00:08; 00:24–00:26; 00:13).

Fig. 3: Still from King, »Battle Ready Leadership« (00:53)

In another ad entitled »Win Marjorie Taylor Greene's 50 Cal Rifle!«, representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (GA-14) not only seems to encourage voters to take up arms but goes even further by providing them the actual weapon. Indeed, she tells viewers to sign up on her website to win a sniper rifle that she prominently displays and fire-tests throughout the ad. According to the YouTube description below the video, the weapon (a Barrett M82A1) is »the same type of gun that TRIGGERS the Fake News Media and Democrats all across the country« and that »the hate-America gun-grabbers in DC would love to BAN if they ever get the votes« (Greene 09/16/2021).[11] In the ad, Greene compares the featured sniper to the military equipment left in Afghanistan after the pressed withdrawal of US troops in August 2021 and accuses President Joe Biden to have handed left-behind weapons to the Taliban. She paints Biden as a traitor and a coward, who »should be impeached« (00:28–00:29), before stepping up and presenting herself as a muscular, gun-toting, and ready-to-fight Republican candidate: In the clip, Greene holds up the rifle that she intends to give away to an audience member (and prospect voter). The pose and her attire are reminiscent of 1980s and 1990s action and science fiction blockbusters (fig. 4).

The ad implies that Greene is tougher, more authentic, and more masculine than Biden, and her massive-looking gun is here to emphasize this point. She suggests that she is »going to blow away the Democrats' socialist agenda« in 2022 (00:51–00:55), before firing the gun at a Toyota Prius labeled ›socialism,‹ which results in a dramatic explosion shot in multiple angles. »Target destroyed«, the ad concludes (see fig. 5).[12] The special effects (e.g., the sniper scope used to frame

11 Interestingly, the manufacturer characterizes the featured gun on its website as »[m]ore than just a rifle, the Model 82 is an *American icon*« (»Model 82A1«, my emphasis).

12 This trope of shooting at reified problems is prominent in Republican women's ads. Another example includes Katie Britt (AL)'s ad »Shoot Straight«, in which the candidate shoots at clay targets while narrating issues she blames on President Joe Biden and his government. She

the hybrid electric car and the messages »target acquired« and »target destroyed« popping on the screen) not only mimic military gear and situations but they also bring to mind pop-cultural texts that have aestheticized this military imaginary and made the public familiar with military visuals.

Fig. 4: Still from Greene, »Win Marjorie Taylor Greene's 50 Cal Rifle!« (00:31)

In channeling the figure of the ›badass‹ shooting heroine of science fiction and action films (through her ›tough-guy‹ attire, that comprises aviator-style sunglasses, a khaki jacket, silver chains, and her main props, a beige Humvee, and the sniper), Greene casts herself as a familiar protector and a rightful enactor of violence. In her ad, this righteous violence is legitimized by the supposed treason and cowardice of the sitting president and the Democrats that surround him – he »broke America's pledge to *never* leave a man behind«, she tells us, implying that retribution is necessary (00:43, italics original). From the energetic music which leaves room for the loud gunshot and even louder explosion, the flashy visuals, and Marjorie Taylor Greene's accusatory and aggressive tone, the ad clearly aims to produce strong emotional responses in viewers and to galvanize them towards action. Greene not only spectacularizes politics by using a gun in her ad, but she also

promises her audience, rifle in hand, that she will »stop Joe Biden's radical agenda dead in its tracks« (Britt 04/18/2022 00:09–00:13). Likewise, candidate Pamela Gordon (OK-02) shoots in her ad »Pamela Gordon for US Congress«, first a TV showing a White man in a suit dancing around money (which stands for lobbies controlling politicians), then a piggy bank (a symbol of import spending), then a barrel of oil (which stands for the reliance on foreign energy), and, finally, a sheet of paper with the marking »compromising with socialism« (Gordon 05/17/2022).

gamifies political participation by promising prospect voters to win the featured gun. In fact, political support (i.e., signing up on her website) is here rewarded by the tactical capability (i.e., winning the military-style weapon) to enact violence against political enemies – enemies who are explicitly identified by name in the ad. Through her performance of rugged femininity, it appears that she invites her audience into fantasies of political violence and empowerment: Societal issues, it is argued, are not to be solved through debates and policymaking, they are to be »blow[n] away«.

Fig. 5: Stills from Greene, »Win Marjorie Taylor Greene's 50 Cal Rifle!«, from left to right: 00:57; 01:01; 01:04; 01:13)

In their ads, Republican women tend to cast themselves as fighters and helpmates, in the conservative war supposedly waged against »socialism« and »leftists«. Contrary to their male counterparts, however, they are seemingly also expected to put priority on their home and, if they have some, their children. In fact, it appears that female candidates are supposed to fulfill their duties as caretakers from all levels of social organization: from the home to the state and, finally, the nation. It is also necessary to note that the (symbolic or actual) violence enacted in the political ads analyzed here is done on behalf of a militarized capitalist patriarchy. The ads not only showcase a politician and her political beliefs, but also a commercial good: the gun. Indeed, candidates exhibit firearms and sometimes even test their force for potential consumers. They, therefore, implicitly or not, mark their support for the US gun industry and, more broadly, for a powerful military-industrial complex.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined how Republican women candidates deploy guns in their political communication during the US midterm elections of 2022. It has shown that many legitimate their place in the party through the performance of what I have called rugged femininity, which encapsulates elements of hegemonic masculinity, rugged individualism, and traits traditionally characterized as feminine (especially motherhood and domesticity). In the political ads analyzed, Republican women simultaneously re-imagine the role of conservative women in US society through, first and foremost, their political ambitions and activities, but also, and importantly, their loaded guns. At the same time, they nonetheless reinforce traditional gender roles and conventions, which expect women to be motherly, caring, and typically fit and attractive. In doing so, they articulate a conflicting discourse that aims both to dismantle the patriarchal order on which the Republican Party operates and to fix gender power hierarchies tightly in place, as they emphasize their role of mothers and caretakers. In other words, Republican women candidates to Congress frame their political agency and empowerment in and through the logics of (White) heteropatriarchy and neoliberal capitalism.

In a context of heightened political polarization in the US, the narrative strategies of the ads analyzed in this article seem to prepare spectators (i.e., prospect voters) to accept, and perhaps even, engage in (future) political violence – to not »retreat« but to »reload«. Indeed, this performance of rugged femininity by Republican women politicians is instrumental to a larger reactionary discourse currently promoted by many within the Republican Party (and, more broadly, by the US far right) – specifically through notions of insurgency, corruption, and ›war‹. Through the melodramatic mode, the GOP routinely depicts the United States as a victimized nation, brought to its demise by supposed enemies: sometimes domestic, like the Democratic party and the so-called liberal left, sometimes foreign, like China. In *Orgies of Feelings* (2014), Elisabeth Anker demonstrates that melodrama functions as a powerful national political discourse in the US. She argues that political melodramas construct the nation as »a virtuous and innocent victim of villainous action« and justify the intensification of state power and violence as »expressions of virtue« (Anker 2014: 2) and as legitimate means of retribution against those considered hurting the nation. As Anker writes, »[t]he eradication of [I would add, real or felt] injustice in melodramatic political discourse… is about an aggressive performance of strength in the national political sphere« (3) that also, and importantly, requires the »melodramatic mobilization of a political subject« (4). In the political discourse analyzed in this contribution, voters are indeed encouraged to ›join arms‹ with Republican politicians (by proxy or not) to fight to save the United States from supposedly falling into socialism and authoritarianism. The guns displayed in the ads I analyzed are more than symbolic shortcuts to signal a staunch support to the Second

Amendment: They are actively used to blow problems away. In conclusion, Republican women's guns in political ads stand paradoxically as female empowerment and (White) female rage, as right-wing fantasy of political violence and imminent conservative regeneration, and as tool of both nation-building and state-demolition. These political ads reflect, with their paranoid style of politics and armed patriotism, the radicalization of a party in quest of meaning and power in a post-Trump era.

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