

## “KEEPING THE MAN A MAN”: DOMESTIC FAILURE AND DOMESTIC SUCCESS IN *THE DELINEATOR*

by Jacqueline S. Shine

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Amidst the usual fashion spreads and cooking advice that filled the pages of the March 1923 *Delineator*, a women’s magazine published by the Butterick Co., was a personal essay. The confessional piece, promised in the Editor’s Note was the story of “one wife whose success has left her empty, written out of the very depths of experience, written with the keen and poignant simplicity which makes literature.”<sup>1</sup> “Despoiled: The confession of a wife who failed,” was written in the first person by an anonymous author described as “one of the conspicuous figures of the professional world.”<sup>2</sup> Bylined only as “Herself,” this woman’s experience was expected to resonate with *The Delineator’s* broad audience—but none more than those women who ‘foolishly,’ in the magazine’s estimation, called themselves feminists. These women, the author explained, “rage against the dependence of wifedom...protesting out of a vast unknowledge of life.” “*The dependence of the wife is the fact that keeps the man a man* [author’s emphasis]. It’s the fact that writes the great books, builds the bridges, subdues the wilderness, governs the empires.”

She claimed to have come to this knowledge through hard experience. “Despoiled” tells the story of her failed marriage. She attributes its collapse to her insistence on having a career outside the home. Her husband, also a professional, became progressively lazier and angrier. But this was no default in *his* character; she concluded that her unwillingness to assume a domestic role was what “ruined” her husband. She wrote of her working life,

I began to undermine a man’s working capacity, to rob him of his sense of responsibility to his talent and to his wife. Both of these are essential to a man’s manhood ... I debauched Arthur’s manhood as surely and as completely as if I had given him drugs instead of money. Even his big brain could not stay this insidious undermining of his character. The greater fault, the greater weakness was mine.<sup>3</sup>

The piece was just one example of a larger response to cultural anxiety about the role of women in the workplace. Between 1870 and 1920, the number of female clerical workers in the United States had grown from 10,000 to over two million. As historian Jennifer Scanlon notes, “any measure of economic independence for married women was viewed by traditionalists as a threat to the traditional family.”<sup>4</sup> One venue in which to mediate this problem—to offer an ideological corrective—was in the pages of women’s

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<sup>1</sup> “Despoiled: The confession of a wife who failed,” *Delineator*, March 1923, 18. *Delineator* collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Northampton, MA. (Hereafter SSC.)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies’ Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 81. Of course, the “problem” of women working only became a problem when native-born white women began entering the workplace. Working-class women had long been laboring in factories—and in the homes of wealthier women—as well as laboring in their homes, but it was the phenomenon of women entering white-collar professions that became what Jean Matthews calls “indices of basic changes in women’s lives and in social organization.” Jean Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman: The Women’s Movement in America, 1875-1930* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dees, 2003), 50.

magazines.

The writer/author of "Despoiled" ultimately divorced her husband, calling it "his one chance to save his brain alive." This candid and public self-reflection, she said, was an effort to caution women against stumbling down the same lonely path, a warning couched in melodramatic self-flagellation and a tone suggesting world-weary exhaustion. In telling the story, she presented and then discarded the "mis-guided" assumptions of feminists early in the article: "I believed—God help me for it, poor little fool—that wives had a right to develop their brains by competitive earning," she wrote. Near its conclusion, she reiterated her conviction that women must cede their independence, sacrifice it for the sake of their husbands' endangered masculinity: "For that keeping of the man a man with all the stupendous facts that follow, the woman must pay with the sacrifice of her best keenness and intellect, with her talents, with all those splendid mental contacts with life which come alone from competitive earning. She can pay her way with the babies."<sup>5</sup>

The message in "Despoiled" was clear: feminists could argue all they wanted about the viability of their talents and their need for independence, but only at the cost of the health and happiness of the men around them—and, invariably, at the cost of the natural and social order. The piece, which ends on the fatalistic note struck by a woman who has chosen her lot—"Only out of pain and passion and hope deferred does nature permit new life to come"—was typical of women's magazines of its time, suggests Jennifer Scanlon. *The Delineator* and its competitors, like *Ladies' Home Journal*, sought to model for its readers "right" conduct and appropriate social behavior, often by demonstrating the bleak nature of the emerging alternatives. "They encouraged," she writes, "*inaction* [author's emphasis] rather than action, conformity rather than individual expression, guided rather than self-generated change."<sup>6</sup>

Often these messages served the interests of a burgeoning consumer culture, linking, Scanlon argues, consumer behavior to pleasure and to women's roles within the social order. By suggesting that her insistence on being the family wage earner destroyed her marriage, the author of "Despoiled" offers not just a cautionary tale, but a corrective model, one that points to consumer culture and motherhood as the spheres appropriate for women to operate in.

However, the production of these messages was not only useful to commercial interests. Throughout the interwar period, other cultural participants, including the Coolidge administration, began to see women's magazines such as *The Delineator* as a crucial locus for disseminating ideologies of American identity and, in particular, the emerging ideology of homeownership. Two years before "Despoiled" appeared in 1923, *The Delineator* initiated the Better Homes in America campaign, which was becoming a crucial aspect of the Commerce Department's efforts to expand homeownership. In exploring the history of the campaign from its private-sector inception to government incorporation, I will trace the rise of a media campaign centered around capitalist production and participation, and which privileged and promoted a discourse of the home. In doing so, the Better Homes in America campaign constructed a normative American identity that valorized the participation of white middle-class Americans.

## **"NOT HOUSES MERELY, BUT HOMES!": BUILDING THE BETTER HOMES CAMPAIGN**

The Better Homes in America campaign was organized in 1922 as a non-profit home reform effort

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<sup>5</sup> "Despoiled," 18, SSC.

<sup>6</sup> Scanlon, 5.

of *The Delineator* and was incorporated by the U.S. Department of Commerce under Herbert Hoover in 1924. Over its ten years of operation, the program was carried out at its peak by 30,000 members, almost exclusively women, who were organized into 7,200 local and regional committees. Centrally administered by the program's home office, these local committees distributed literature and materials and held annual "demonstration weeks," in which model homes were exhibited to the public. The program attempted to encourage uniformity of presentation among the many regional branches by sending guidance and information from the home bureau, *The Delineator's* New York office.

What is of great interest here is the way in which the campaign solicited the participation of multiple cultural actors, from politicians on local, state, and federal levels to business and community leaders. The campaign's tacit support for commodity consumption reflected the interests of market forces, and its rhetoric echoed concerns about the erosion of American identity from a variety of sources. The Better Homes in America campaign became a platform by which Herbert Hoover, first as Commerce Secretary and then as President, could express the ideological aspects of his goals for housing policy. Early biographers describe these goals, in part, as attempts "to create a better public understanding of what constitutes good housing; to create an interest in home ownership by the individual; to create a national interest and a sense of community responsibility for better homes and housing."<sup>7</sup>

It was to Hoover's advantage that just as he was beginning to articulate his position on housing, the issue was taken up by *The Delineator*. The magazine was founded in 1873 as a pattern catalog by E. Butterick and Company but gradually evolved into a more general topical women's magazine, featuring lifestyle materials and articles on etiquette, cooking, homemaking, and motherhood.<sup>8</sup> Under the leadership of author and social reformer Theodore Dreiser, who ultimately became editor in 1907, *The Delineator* began to have what historian Frank Luther Mott calls a "distinctly controversial and reformatory trend," but with an equally distinct middle-class sensibility:

'Matrimonial unrest,' divorce, 'race suicide,' woman suffrage, the high cost of living...were all subjects for articles or symposia...The fight against fraudulent merchandise was continued, and there was a more spectacular crusade to rescue children from orphan asylums and promote the welfare of underprivileged children.<sup>9</sup>

But he left the magazine in 1910, and *The Delineator* only halfheartedly continued its "crusade...for the legal rights of women and children," even though "it had as much interest in reform as in fashions," until the advent of the First World War.<sup>10</sup>

American involvement in the war allowed for an expansion of *The Delineator's* crusading platform. It also advanced an increasingly sophisticated set of assumptions and arguments about American identity that served as the platform on which the Better Homes in America campaign was built. Nationalistic in both style and content, wartime articles focused on thrift, offered advice for the mothers, wives, and

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<sup>7</sup> Ray Lyman Wilbur and Arthur Mastick Hyde, *The Hoover Policies* (New York: Scribner, 1937), 81.

<sup>8</sup> For more on the history of *The Delineator*, see Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1865–1885*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1957), 486.

<sup>9</sup> Mott, 486.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

daughters of soldiers, and shrilly reported German atrocities. The end of the war ushered in a moment of intense conflict with regards to the articulation of a cohesive and unquestionable American identity. With the advent of female suffrage in 1920, attitudes about the assumed “mental and psychological differences between the sexes were [becoming] less clear-cut and less immutable than had traditionally been thought.”<sup>11</sup>

These social concerns were reflected in the pages of *The Delineator*. Many were directly voiced by government officials, who used the magazine to disseminate ideological opinion without violating prevailing beliefs, particularly of the Harding administration, that “government should act as a source of information, coordination, and national guidance, but [not] a coercive force.”<sup>12</sup> But there were limits to the rhetoric: what Hoover and Harding intended was not self-government, per se, but *directed* self-government that served political interests, achieved by “convincing the American people that their own self-interest lay in responsible cooperation with each other” and in acquiescence to social norms.<sup>13</sup>

This model required either the elimination of differences—race, class, gender, or politics—or framing them as threatening in order to achieve “cooperation.” As feminist historian Amy Kaplan writes,

The notion of domestic policy makes sense only in opposition to foreign policy...The idea of the foreign policy depends on the sense of the nation as a domestic space imbued with a sense of at-homeness, in contrast to an external world perceived as alien and threatening. Reciprocally, a sense of the foreign is necessary to erect the boundaries that enclose the nation as home.<sup>14</sup>

Media representations in *The Delineator* sought to construct external enemies within the borders of the nation as a means of re-inscribing the boundaries and consequences of home. The magazine consistently cast political dissent as threatening to social order and presumed to identify as its audience the majority that would oppose such dissent.

For example, under Marie Meloney’s new 1921 editorship, *The Delineator* ran a three-part series, published in June, July, and August and written by Vice-President Calvin Coolidge, which focused on the threat of Communism in American institutions, particularly colleges and universities. The piece asked, “Are the ‘Reds’ Stalking Our College Women?” and surveyed student publications from, among other institutions, Columbia University and Vassar College, for signs of Communist propaganda.

In the July 1921 installment, “Trotzky vs. Washington,” Coolidge constructed an image of an unsailable Republic that must steel itself against the onslaught of a Communist attack on values which, again, gathered strength in educational institutions. “The American people...are the most conservative in the world,” he wrote, “Conservatism does not make much noise, but it is none the less powerful. It is not easily overcome...Demonstrably it is the result of the rule of the people themselves.”<sup>15</sup> Given this bulwark of conservative democratic values, Coolidge said, the efforts of college faculty to “pervert the minds of the

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<sup>11</sup> Scanlon, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Joan Hoff Wilson, *Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975), 69.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Amy Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” in Cathy Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher, eds., *No More Separate Spheres! A Next Wave American Studies Reader* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002), 183-270.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin Coolidge, “Trotzky vs. Washington,” *Delineator*, July 1921, 10-11, 38, 39.

young with false doctrines and suggestive books...cannot prevail against the reasonable efforts of unselfish patriotism."

Having located the "enemies" of the Republic in educated liberals and their academic institutions, Coolidge had thus prepared for, in August 1921, the clear articulation of both the identity (the American woman) and the locus (the American home) of the Republic's best champions. This rhetoric set the stage for the cultural manipulations of the next decade. "This is essentially a problem for the women," Coolidge wrote. "To make a home is to be a capitalist. It is likewise to be an altruist. Back of the home, its only support, its only guaranty, is the American government. At the fireside sits the motherhood of the country."<sup>16</sup>

In selecting a women's magazine as his platform, in identifying women and, more specifically, white women as the nation's best defense against its insidious ideological enemies, and in naming the home as the crucial site of "American values," Coolidge signaled the opening of the "private sphere" of the home to the surveillance and interventions of government forces which were, after all, "the ultimate protector of all rights."<sup>17</sup> Chief among these rights, Coolidge said, was the human inclination toward private property: "Agitation about the distribution and the right of ownership of property is not new...[but] they run counter to the nature of mankind. People in general feel and know that they have a right to private ownership of property."<sup>18</sup> His rhetoric suggested the presence of an internal threat to American values, a sense that those values were superior and *natural*, and a representation, in the image of the private home, of what the expression of those values looked like. In expressing these views in the pages of *The Delineator*, Coolidge sought the consent of a broad swath of "mainstream" society i.e. the magazine's white, middle-class, and female readership, to a government ideology that privileged property ownership and a particular understanding of democracy and citizenship.

Of course, it is important to note that many women in fact *did* resist these ideological pressures to participate in and facilitate the development of separate public and private spheres. Feminist historian Linda Kerber argues that the idea of separate spheres was a metaphor that referred "often interchangeably to an ideology *imposed on* women, a culture *created by* women, a set of boundaries *expected to be observed* by women [author's emphasis]," and that women's relationship to this concept was complex in practice and in historical perspective.<sup>19</sup> The imposition, both by figures such as Coolidge and by the historians who evaluate such ideologies, of the separate spheres construction radically simplified and consolidated discourse by assuming a monolithic audience of women, with common ties along race, class, experience, desires, and values. Virtually all discussion of the subject until very recently," Kerber writes, "has focused on the experience of white women, mostly of the middle class."<sup>20</sup> By extension, Coolidge's use of the separate spheres metaphor in the pages of *The Delineator* was a way of prioritizing white femininity as a crucial—the crucial—structuring force in American political culture.

The relationship between women and the separate sphere metaphor was complicated. While the concept "clearly served the interests of men with whom women lived...women also claimed it for their

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<sup>16</sup> Calvin Coolidge, "Enemies of the Republic: They Must Be Resisted," *Delineator*, August 1921, 10–11, 42.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres and Women's History," in Cathy Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher, eds., *No More Separate Spheres! A Next Wave American Studies Reader* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002: 29-65), 37.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

own, defining their own interests as inextricably linked to the upward mobility of their families, repressing claims for their own autonomy."<sup>21</sup> Thus the rhetoric of the home as being fundamentally "American" persisted in the pages of *The Delineator*, not just because it was an editorial imposition, but because it sought to naturalize the position of the middle-class white woman within society. The "separate sphere" metaphor, coded as concern for the state of the American home, was an editorial refrain that began in the early 1920s and fueled the development of the Better Homes campaign.

Historian Karen Altman writes that Marie Meloney was eager to move the magazine's editorial policy closer to U.S. federal policy for a variety of reasons.<sup>22</sup> Meloney had complicated interests at stake. Chief among these is that she likely saw an opportunity to increase circulation of the magazine by running a "public service" campaign. Named the Washington Bureau Chief of the *Denver Post* at age 18, Meloney was a shrewd politician as well as a journalist. But she was also a lifelong philanthropist and used her position to take up various "public service" causes at many points in her life; in 1930, as editor of the *New York Herald Tribune*, she founded the Forum on Current Problems, which brought international statesmen together for public conferences on current issues.<sup>23</sup> But whatever motivated her interest in "Better Homes"—whatever combination of philanthropy and business acumen—the campaign simultaneously served the interests of other cultural actors, particularly the Harding and Coolidge administrations.

Shortly after hearing Harding speak on the topic of better homes in 1921, Meloney wrote in an April 1922 Editor's Note that "one of the great needs of America to-day is homes, [and thus] *The Delineator* offers a part of its pages to this cause. If you want a home, we wish to help you."<sup>24</sup> In that same issue, readers were also told that "there is an instinctive desire in the heart of every real woman to own her own home...A home should be an investment. Mr. Hoover has said that what American needs more than anything is to own homes."<sup>25</sup>

Meloney's April 1922 mention of the "instinctive desire" to own a home was preparatory to the announcement, in September 1922, of the Better Homes in America campaign. Meloney had actively sought support from state and federal government officials. She announced in her editorial note that "America is short a million homes. No matter where you live, your state needs homes. And especially it needs better homes...[but] even the great circulation of a magazine like *The Delineator* could not reach enough people. For this reason we asked the government of the United States to cooperate with us."<sup>26</sup>

That cooperation was initially fairly limited and largely cosmetic. Marie Meloney sought from the beginning of the campaign to create the appearance of government support and involvement in the Better Homes effort and, by extension, the support of those whom she called "public men." In a September 6, 1922 letter to Secretary of Commerce Hoover, in which she sought a signed campaign endorsement from President Harding, she wrote:

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>22</sup> Karen E. Altman, *Modernity, Gender, and Consumption: Public Discourses on Woman and the Home* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Iowa, 1987), 149.

<sup>23</sup> "Mrs. W.B. Meloney, Noted Editor, Dies," *New York Times*, January 24 1943, 21.

<sup>24</sup> Marie Meloney, "From the Editor's Point of View," *Delineator*, April 1922, 1

<sup>25</sup> Altman, 155; Meloney, "From the Editor's Point of View," April 1922, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Marie Meloney, "From the Editor's Point of View," *Delineator*, September 1922, 1.

I have made a very earnest effort to credit this campaign to the Administration, to which I realized it would be an asset...Women's publications...can and do render uncommercialized services to the public ...It is, I feel, important for public men to realize that women's publications are service magazines. That they have a power for usefulness in this country, and that every encouragement should be given to their publishers and Editors in planning constructive campaigns for the good of the nation.<sup>27</sup>

This belief that an effort carried out by a women's magazine, ostensibly on behalf of "American" women, would only be received successfully if endorsed by "public men," led Meloney to energetically seek broad governmental support, lobbying, in particular, state governors to sign on as visible (if ceremonial) partners in the campaign.

Initially, government officials seem to have contributed to the campaign only after Meloney aggressively sought their endorsements while promising that there would be no attendant responsibilities. She wrote to Herbert Hoover in January 1923, asking for a written endorsement from President Harding: "It was a terrific job to put over the 1922 [Better Homes] movement, but it was a real success, and I feel that we have merited that much recognition from the President."<sup>28</sup> Likewise, in April of that year, with an enclosed a sample letter that Hoover would need only to retype, sign, and return, she wrote again to Hoover:

These next two weeks are critical days in the Better Homes campaign...I promise not to bother you again if you will write one more letter for use in the campaign. It need only be two paragraphs long, and I shall have it reproduced and sent to the women all over the States working day and night on this campaign, who feel that they are getting very little official encouragement.<sup>29</sup>

She enclosed a sample letter that Hoover would need only to retype, sign, and return.

Hoover, however, recalled the campaign's inception differently, writing in his memoirs, "Together with Mrs. William Brown Meloney, I created a volunteer organization called Better Homes in America, of which I was the president or chairman for twelve years. I raised from \$75,000 to \$150,000 per annum from private sources to support the Better Homes movement."<sup>30</sup> But regardless of the questionable rigor and quality of their support, the visibility of government officials was crucial to the campaign's early success, and the campaign's developing ideologies so closely mirrored official messages that they would become absorbed into a larger political and cultural current.

## MEDIATING MESSAGES: BETTER HOMES IN AMERICA 1922-1924

The early literature of the campaign cast the pursuit of "better homes," still ambiguously defined, as a long-neglected part of the general program of American industrial progress. "No year passes," wrote

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<sup>27</sup> Marie M. Meloney to Herbert Hoover, September 6, 1922, Building and Housing—Better Homes in America, Inc., Commerce Files, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library.

<sup>28</sup> Marie M. Meloney to Herbert Hoover, January 31, 1923, Building and Housing—BHA, COM, HHPL.

<sup>29</sup> Marie M. Meloney to Herbert Hoover, April 1 1923, Building and Housing—BHA, COM, HHPL.

<sup>30</sup> Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Cabinet and the Presidency, 1920-1933*, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 93.

Meloney in the October 1922 Editor's Note, "without beholding a change for the better in implements, machinery, working conditions, in every division or department of American industry, save one. And that exception is the average American home."<sup>31</sup> Pages later, Hoover suggested that the home, as part of the machinery of social progress and momentum, needed to be transformed and streamlined in the same way that the factory did: "If...the family is the unit of modern civilization, the home, its shelter and gathering-point, should, it would seem, warrant in its design and furnishing as large a share of attention as the power plant or the factory."<sup>32</sup>

But that valorization of progress also bore specific obligations to women. The home was regarded as the "the factory in which twenty million women toil every day of the year, Sundays and holidays included," a site of productivity neglected by society.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, women needed to be redefined so that they might be seen not just as wives and mothers, but also as industrial producers. Women, Meloney said, had not previously been allowed the privilege of participating in the nation's economic progress; their needs were constantly overlooked in the forward momentum of industrialized society. "The housewife and her problems," Meloney wrote, "have been forgotten...For what matter it if a nation be great in industry, in commerce, in politics, if she be not also great in her homes."<sup>34</sup> The stakes of the Better Homes campaign were thus explicitly linked to capitalist production, and women were enlisted, perhaps even conscripted, in ensuring the success of a national effort toward efficiency and progress.<sup>35</sup>

This argument of "neglect" was lent gravity and substance by the continuing appearance of the support of public men for the Better Homes campaign. The October 1922 issue of *Delineator* particularly drew on this base of support. A two-page spread ringed with photos of the campaign's supporters—all men—announced, "This is not a one-time program" and articulated the ways in which participating governors would support the campaign, which were chiefly ceremonial: they needed only to set aside a week in October for Better Homes Week, which would be run by women in communities across the state.<sup>36</sup>

In that same issue, commentary from Herbert Hoover reinforced the established rhetoric of the home as democratic bulwark. His segment, "The Home as An Investment," referred not to the home as source of equity (as it would later become) but as an ideological investment that propelled the advance of democracy. Not only, he argued, is it "mainly through the hope of enjoying the ownership of a home that the latent energy of any citizenry is called forth," but he also claimed that homeownership has been a persistent American aspiration. "This universal yearning for better homes and the larger security, independence, and freedom that they imply," he wrote, "was the aspiration that carried the pioneers westward."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Marie Meloney, "From the Editor's Point of View," *Delineator*, October 1922, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Herbert Hoover, "The Home As An Investment," *Delineator*, October 1922, 91.

<sup>33</sup> Meloney, "From the Editor's Point of View," October 1922, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Meloney, "From the Editor's Point of View," October 1922, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Of course, these efforts toward efficiency were about more than "helping" women. They also created more work—every task, from laundry to cooking, had a series of codified "steps" that women had to perform. Likewise, Glenna Matthews argues that the interest in household "efficiency" encouraged greater social conformity via uniformity of behaviors and conduct. "In addition to having all the right tools, housewives should learn to do everything exactly on schedule, [experts] thought ... Another cardinal principle [according to home economist Christine Frederick] had to do with standardization: 'Standardize some household task so that you can do it every day in an identical manner without much mental attention. Does this not make it seem less difficult?'" Glenna Matthews in *Just A Housewife: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987), 168-69.

<sup>36</sup> Editors, "Better Homes in America," *Delineator*, October 1922, 19-20.

<sup>37</sup> Hoover, "The Home As An Investment," 17.

What is most interesting about Hoover's commentary is its careful justification for government intrusion into the private sphere, despite his espousal of non-intervention, wherein "business [would] keep out of government [and] government [would] keep out of business."<sup>38</sup> Perhaps Hoover had begun to think of the Better Homes campaign as an ideal platform for the dissemination of state ideologies when he wrote:

While we are about Better Homes for America and are lending such indirect support to the movement as the Government, States, counties, communities, and patriotic individuals and organizations can rightfully give, let us have in mind not houses merely, but homes! There is a large distinction.<sup>39</sup>

His rhetoric skillfully acknowledged the existing demarcation between the public and the private while tacitly asserting that the need for homes, "not houses merely," necessitates some intervention and supervision, a more direct and active shaping of the home by its interested sponsors. How, he asked, can the State ensure the character of the nation if it lacks access to those essential loci wherein character is formed?

Or at least that was his tacit suggestion. Overtly, Hoover advocated voluntary association and private initiative as the best and most effective method of social improvement, rather than, or perhaps instead of, government intervention. In a September 2, 1922 letter to Marie Meloney, Hoover wrote:

The greatest misery that can be relieved in the world is the misery that arises out of bad government, and if your correspondent and others similarly situated are willing to devote themselves to public service they should go straight to the political side as being the only practical method by which these problems can be solved.<sup>40</sup>

Government *itself*, then, wasn't the problem for Hoover, so much as "bad government" was. This usually involved, to his mind, any kind of intrusive legislation that could be construed as "official" state intervention. Supporting and endorsing the management of the private sphere was appropriate, legislating was not.

The October campaign was followed up immediately with a November 1922 report of the campaign's "success," which, wrote Meloney, "was only the beginning of a new fort for the defense of the nation."<sup>41</sup> The report on the October "Demonstration Week" drew heavily on the campaign's political associations, despite the fact that Meloney had been unable to secure a letter of support from President Harding, or much institutional, rather than individual, enthusiasm. A summary article appeared under the seal of the Better Homes Campaign (a hearth enclosed in an oval) with the names of the sixteen members of its Advisory Council—thirteen of whom were men, eleven with ties to the Executive branch. "It is our ambition, also," the text read, "to help America become a nation of home owners—not of renters...There is a new force in America. It is a pride in better homes."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> This was a public statement made in 1928. Wilson, 70.

<sup>39</sup> Hoover, "The Home As Investment," 91.

<sup>40</sup> Herbert Hoover to Marie Meloney, September 2, 1922, Building and Housing—BHA, COM, HHPL.

<sup>41</sup> Marie Meloney, "From the Editor's Point of View," *Delineator*, November 1922, 1.

<sup>42</sup> "Better Homes in America," *Delineator*, November 1922, 18.

Over the next year and a half, *The Delineator* continued to give the Better Homes campaign ample attention in its pages, offering increasingly didactic advice to its readers. The May 1923 magazine *again* reviewed the 1922 campaign, saying, "In any survey of social progress in the United States the year 1922 will stand out as marking among its foremost accomplishments the nation-wide Better Homes in America campaign."<sup>43</sup>

But the campaign was hardly as universal as this rhetoric suggests. The "consciousness of the need of better living conditions" was presented as a neutral and universal standard. But *better living conditions* were highly politicized and often racialized. The campaign's directives tacitly mandated conformist compliance with imposed standards while highlighting difference. A two-page spread in the May 1923 issue throws this politicization of difference into stark relief. The segment highlighted the campaign's prizewinning communities who were awarded cash prizes for "successful" demonstration homes.

Most notably, the third place prize went to St. Helena Island, one of the Gullah communities off the coast of South Carolina whose population was predominantly African American and had been for decades. "Census records for the 1930s," writes historian Janet Hutchinson, "tallied a total population of 4,626 people on the island, of whom 4,458 were African American" and had come to St. Helena as slaves on cotton plantations operated by absentee landowners.<sup>44</sup> It was one of the only communities in which the participation of people of color in the Better Homes campaign was publicly noted or advertised.

St. Helena's award for "one of the most interesting and constructive local campaigns" was described as a "special" award by the magazine. The campaign chair, Mrs. Grace Bigelow House, who was the assistant principal of the island's school, "applied her campaign to the needs of the colored folk of that section of South Carolina. She remodeled, furnished, and equipped a plantation cabin and put the program in the hands of a group of coloured men and women, who carried it out splendidly."<sup>45</sup> Karen Altman notes that the following year, St. Helena again received "special" recognition. With a home that cost \$643 to build, the community took second prize to Port Huron, Michigan, whose model home cost \$5,500 to complete. Though its language masked difference, the campaign valued certain contributions over others, particularly those that came from white women.<sup>46</sup> St. Helena's award was framed as a "special" award, argues Janet Hutchinson, because "the national leaders of the movement may have feared racist opposition on the part of white committees if they awarded prizes to black demonstrations over those of whites."<sup>47</sup>

The rhetoric of difference in describing St. Helena Island, which drew attention to and made an exception of the participation of people of color, was typical for the campaign, which "by 1924...had divided the program into racially segregated competitions."<sup>48</sup> Even as *The Delineator* enthused that successful campaigns were "inspiring instances of civic pride [wherein] men and women...gladly submerged their own personalities and opinions for the cause," there existed a hierarchy of racial difference.<sup>49</sup> Its

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<sup>43</sup> Marie Meloney, "From the Editor's Point of View," *Delineator*, May 1923, 1.

<sup>44</sup> Janet Hutchinson, "Better Homes and Gullah," *Agricultural History* 67, 2 (Spring 1993): 104.

<sup>45</sup> "Better Homes in America: The prize-winning demonstration homes," *Delineator*, May 1923, 12-13.

<sup>46</sup> Altman, 87.

<sup>47</sup> Hutchinson, 107.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> "Better Homes in America: The prize-winning demonstration homes," *Delineator*, May 1923: 12-13.

universalizing language insisted that “every city in the United States should enroll in this movement,”<sup>50</sup> even while *The Delineator’s* coverage of St. Helena “revealed economic and racial prejudice.”<sup>51</sup> Often the magazine “printed the islanders’ speech in sentences such as...‘I’s gwine [sic] make improvements yet fo’ Better Homes Week!’”<sup>52</sup> Some of this may have had more to do with the anticipation of racist reactions from other communities than with the editors’ inclinations. But whatever the reason, it is clear from these disparities in rhetoric that the campaign masked difference while prioritizing conformity. Thus we can see that the campaign’s apparently cohesive purpose—“better homes” for all Americans—was actually constructed from tenuous compromise and submerged conflict. That white women would want to maintain “better homes” was accepted as fact; that women of colour would share in these aspirations was seen as an aberration, however quaint.

The May 1923 issue also announced “four new features” of the 1923 campaign, which was to include “a standard for the home library, a music library with a list of the best music [and] pictures for the home.”<sup>53</sup> Trading on a lack of an identifiable commercial supporter, the magazine claimed the following month that the campaign was intended to “make it possible for all citizens to learn from an authoritative and non-commercial source the essentials of a better home.”<sup>54</sup> Yet socially correct conduct also required socially correct consumer behavior, which would become even clearer when two of these proposed features, for the home library and music library, appeared in the pages of the magazine in August and November 1923.

In August 1923 (the same month that he assumed the presidency after Warren G. Harding’s sudden death) Calvin Coolidge’s byline appeared with the piece “Books for Better Homes.” Because “all great and fine things have their beginnings in thought...[and] the mind and the soul are the forces behind every forward step civilization takes,” the campaign offered materials that would cultivate the “right” frame of mind for the better home.<sup>55</sup> The article promised readers that they might attain, through literature, “a mind that is keen, straight-thinking, and well-balanced...prepare[ed] for the life of American citizenship.”<sup>56</sup>

But to merely read appropriate books was not enough for a campaign that “promoted commercialism and commodification” and “supported the general interests of capital,” as Karen Altman notes.<sup>57</sup> Readers were told that “you must do more than read [the books suggested]. You must *own* them. You must make them part of you. And you must choose the *right* books.”<sup>58</sup> There was satisfaction in consumption, in ownership—a satisfaction that was framed as both desirable and essential: “In the right to personal possession that comes from ownership of a book there is a wealth of satisfaction ... a borrowed book is as unsatisfactory as a borrowed friend.” Coolidge then listed twenty essential volumes for a Better Homes library,

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Hutchinson, 110.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Marie Meloney, “From the Editor’s Point of View,” *Delineator*, June 1923, 2.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Marie Meloney, “From the Editor’s Point of View,” *Delineator*, August 1923, 1.

<sup>56</sup> Calvin Coolidge, “Books for Better Homes,” *Delineator*, August 1923, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Altman, 161.

<sup>58</sup> Coolidge, “Books for Better Homes,” 2. Author’s emphasis.

which included a range of fiction and non-fiction, including cookbooks and parenting books. At the top of the list was, of course, the Bible.<sup>59</sup>

Likewise, in November 1923, the magazine published a list, collected from reader surveys of the “ten songs most frequently mentioned by American home people.”<sup>60</sup> The list suggests, in subtext, that a good deal of anxiety persisted about the acceleration of modern life and changing social roles, with particular regard to racial identity. Marie Meloney wrote in her Editor’s Note that,

The program was a reply to the cynics of the world. Among the ten songs most frequently mentioned ... there is not a single piece of jazz. They are still simple melodies and hymns. If this list be an index, we are still a religious people, thank God... These songs ... reveal a little of the soul of America. Close to our hearts are God and country and clean love.<sup>61</sup>

The prescriptions of the Better Homes campaign would ameliorate anxieties and stabilize social roles. The perceived “threat” of jazz music operates here on two levels, both of them racial. On one level, of course, it is an explicitly African-American musical form. That “American home people” expressed no interest in jazz, which came as a relief to Meloney, reveals the assumption, and expectation, that her audience was white. Furthermore, she constructed whiteness as the normative and preferential identity of homeowners the campaign sought to develop. On another level, jazz also represented disorder and chaos; the social disruption of the so-called Jazz Age, which for some white American women represented liberation from constraining social roles.

The messages projected by the Better Homes in America campaign in its first few years were complicated, then, by questions of identity. Despite their structuring presence and influence, issues of race, class, and gender were unaddressed—or poorly addressed—by the campaign; yet its rhetoric, and many of its sentiments, expressed the hope that efforts toward social improvement would ameliorate the pressures of difference. As government authorities became more and more involved in the movement over the next several years, these questions of identity and their bearing on civic participation and citizenship grew only more complex.

## BETTER HOMES IN AMERICA, INCORPORATED

As the 1923 campaign went on, Marie Meloney found it increasingly difficult to secure funding for the campaign, which grossly exceeded the magazine’s budget, largely because she was reluctant to seek commercial sponsors. She feared that direct commercial associations would taint the movement’s reputation and undermine its generalized advocacy of consumer behavior via the appearance of specific endorsements. The 1922 campaign had cost the magazine \$25,000. The 1923 campaign, which called for the construction of a permanent demonstration home in Washington, D.C., was expected to cost at least \$5,000-\$10,000 more.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, correspondence suggested that “various agencies not responsible for this work are claiming credit,” and Meloney’s time was increasingly engaged in attempting to protect

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Marie Meloney, “From the Editor’s Point of View,” *Delineator*, November 1923, 1.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Edgar Rickard to Herbert Hoover, May 16 1923. Building and Housing—BHA, COM, HHPL.

her work from commercial exploitation. At one point she even sought a copyright for the phrase "Better Homes."<sup>63</sup>

Meanwhile, Herbert Hoover was increasingly eager to absorb the campaign as a "publicity and 'education' apparatus" of the Division of Building and Housing, an arm of the Commerce Department created in 1921.<sup>64</sup> Historian Karen Altman notes that as early as June 1922 public relations experts in the Commerce Department had "latched onto *The Delineator's* Better Homes campaign ... [and] determined that BHA was 'exactly the thing needed to shove the whole housing and better homes ideas of the Department over [author's emphasis]," and that "the best place in the world for such propaganda is the women's magazines."<sup>65</sup>

In the spring of 1923, just before Demonstration Week, Hoover wrote to Meloney on the topic of handing the administration of the campaign over to the federal government. He was careful to emphasize, however, the fact that he wanted *The Delineator* to continue to receive credit for its efforts, regardless of what shape the campaign might take. This assurance was ostensibly intended to placate Marie Meloney. In a letter to the president of the Butterick Publishing Company, however, Hoover admitted that the connection to the magazine was essential to the campaign's ongoing success. "To carry on such a movement without strong and devoted journalistic support is...extremely unlikely of success," he wrote, recognizing that media were a crucial platform from which to naturalize ideas about homeownership and the ideologies of citizenship that supported it.<sup>66</sup>

By late December 1923, an administration for the "new" organization was in place, with Herbert Hoover as president and economist James Ford, its executive director. As Marie Meloney suggested, "the director ought to be a man, [while] ... the field workers should be women."<sup>67</sup> In addition, Hoover and Meloney secured three years of funding from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Foundation and a certificate of incorporation for the newly-named Better Homes in America, Inc.

The April 1924 *Delineator* announced the transition, assuring readers that "the campaign henceforth will be carried on with a broader scope, but will still be based upon the standards and ideals set up and followed by *The Delineator*."<sup>68</sup> Though the magazine continued to run content related to the campaign until Meloney's departure in 1926, the campaign was now wholly absorbed by the federal government. The announcement praised Marie Meloney, but her contributions, to which government officials were initially fairly indifferent, were glossed over, and she was essentially pushed out of her own organization. Former Better Homes president Ray Lyman Wilbur, for example, remembered the campaign's genesis this way: "Hoover, with the aid of Mrs. William Brown Meloney, organized a voluntary association of 'Better Homes in America' of which he was chairman."<sup>69</sup>

Though the corporation was technically an independent nonprofit organization, it claimed heavy "co-operation," with the Department of Commerce, which recognized that "better homes' articulated a

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<sup>63</sup> Herbert Hoover to George Wilder, June 14, 1923. Building and Housing—BHA, COM, HHPL.

<sup>64</sup> Altman, 154.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>66</sup> Herbert Hoover to George Wilder, October 6, 1923. Building and Housing—BHA, COM, HHPL.

<sup>67</sup> Marie Meloney to Herbert Hoover, December 15, 1923. Building and Housing—BHA, COM, HHPL.

<sup>68</sup> "Marie Meloney, "From the Editor's Point of View," *Delineator*, April 1924, 1.

<sup>69</sup> Wilbur and Hyde, 82.

standard, commonsense way of life and it constituted a political, economic, and social order conducive to the interests of both capital and the state in the 1920s."<sup>70</sup> What's more, the Better Homes in America organization was a crucial platform for continuing the project of consolidating and solidifying American identity. The organization supported what Hoover called, in 1930, "this unparalleled rise of the American man and woman ... [which] sprang from ideas and ideals, which liberated the mind and stimulated the exertion of a people."<sup>71</sup>

But by the time Hoover even hailed this "unparalleled rise," the campaign he had hoped would foster their continued growth was beginning to decline in strength. Its peak year, Karen Altman reports, was 1930.<sup>72</sup> By 1933, the campaign "appeared to have no financial stability" and James Ford's leadership was generally regarded as incompetent.<sup>73</sup> Two years later, BHA, Inc., liquidated its assets, by which point "none of the original institutions of BHA oversaw the close of [the] campaign."<sup>74</sup>

The story of the campaign is the story of changing interwar attitudes about the American home. Screeds against communism and for property ownership began to do work that ten years prior would have been impossible, while simultaneously enabling greater government activism in the Depression era. Where Hoover was unwilling to either commit significant funding to housing or support legislative efforts that would facilitate the private housing market, the New Deal programs of the Roosevelt administration sought to more directly influence models of and for the American home.

This increased private-sphere activism would not have been possible without the Better Homes in America campaign's preparatory work and staging efforts. The rhetoric of the campaign conditioned and manipulated popular expectations and attitudes about government responsibility to and involvement in the housing market. Of course, this was not the campaign's original intention as that would imply cohesive leadership and consolidated ideology, related to the mediating impact of varied influences and complex interactions. Instead, work begun by one group of actors (Marie Meloney, the Harding administration) allowed for the programs and practices of another group of actors (specifically the Roosevelt administration). The arbiters of later government efforts, Roosevelt among them, had no direct contact with the Better Homes in America campaign. Yet the ideologies they espoused, both new and divergent: government ownership of property, as well as preexisting and convergent: re-inscribing racial difference, were made possible by this project that sought to change American homes.

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<sup>70</sup> Altman, 164.

<sup>71</sup> Wilbur and Hyde, 22.

<sup>72</sup> Altman, 148.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

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