



Gendered Politics in the Modern South: The Susan Smith Case and the Rise of a New Sexism (Making the Modern South)

Keira V. Williams

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In the fall of 1994 Susan Smith, a young mother from Union, South Carolina, reported that an African American male carjacker had kidnapped her two children. The news sparked a multi-state investigation and evoked nationwide sympathy. Nine days later, she confessed to drowning the boys in a nearby lake, and that sympathy quickly turned to outrage. Smith became the topic of thousands of articles, news segments, and media broadcasts -- overshadowing the coverage of midterm elections and the O. J. Simpson trial. The notoriety of her case was more than tabloid fare, however; her story tapped into a cultural debate about gender and politics at a crucial moment in American history.

In *Gendered Politics in the Modern South* Keira V. Williams uses the Susan Smith case to analyze the "new sexism" found in the agenda of the budding neoconservatism movement of the 1990s. She notes that in the weeks after Smith's confession, soon-to-be Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich made statements linking Smith's behavior to the 1960s counterculture movement and to Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" social welfare programs. At the same time, various magazines declared the "death of feminism" and a "crisis in masculinity" as the assault on liberal social causes gained momentum. In response to this perceived crisis, Williams argues, a distinct code of gender discrimination developed that sought to reassert a traditional form of white male power. In addition to consulting a wide variety of sources, including letters from Smith written since her incarceration, Williams contextualizes the infamous case within the history of gender politics over the last quarter of the twentieth century. She reveals how the rhetoric, imagery, and legal treatment of infanticidal mothers changed and asserts that the latest shift reflects the evolution of a neoconservative politics.

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