

A Great Disorder

A Great Disorder

NATIONAL MYTH AND THE
BATTLE FOR AMERICA

Richard Slotkin

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For Iris, with love and thanks

A. A violent order is disorder; and
B. A great disorder is an order. These
Two things are one.

—Wallace Stevens, “Connoisseur of Chaos” (1942)

Flags are blossoming now where little else is blossoming
and I am bent on fathoming what it means to love my country.

.....

A patriot is not a weapon. A patriot is one who wrestles for the
soul of her country
as she wrestles for her own being. . . .

—Adrienne Rich, “One night on Monterey Bay the death-freeze
of the century” (1991)

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A Great Disorder

Introduction

OUR COUNTRY is in the grip of a prolonged crisis that has profoundly shaken our institutions, our structures of belief, and the solidarities that sustain us as a nation. The past forty years have seen a steadily intensifying culture war, expressed politically in a hyperpartisanship that has crippled the government's ability to deal constructively with the problems endemic to modern society. Major crises, like the financial meltdown of 2008–2009 and the COVID-19 pandemic, which in the past would have inspired a patriotic rallying of public opinion, have instead intensified our divisions and raised the potential for political violence.

It is as if we are living in two different countries: a blue nation, built around large cities in which many races and ethnic groups mingle and blend, prospering on a wave of technological change, sensitive to persistent economic and racial inequality, and willing to support government programs to regulate the economy and increase social justice; and a red nation of beleaguered smaller cities and towns and rural districts, whose people are resistant to the cultural changes attendant on an increasingly multiethnic society and changing sexual mores, aggrieved by the loss of employment and security inflicted by a heartless corporate economy, and disaffected with a government whose regulations harm their economic interests and foster secular values at the expense of religious tradition. The latter has generated a political movement, Make America Great Again (MAGA), whose angry passion and propensity for verbal and physical violence has altered the language and the conduct of American politics. Some of this partisan rancor can be attributed to the propaganda of well-financed special interest groups, to politicized cable news networks and

internet feeds that lock consumers into ideological echo chambers, but it would be a mistake to ignore the depth of the passions behind the partisan split.¹

The differences between red and blue America are rooted in culture: in enduring systems of belief developed over long periods of time, reflecting different experiences of life and understandings of what America is, what it has been, and what it is supposed to be. Each has a different understanding of who counts as American, a different reading of American history, and a different vision of what our future ought to be. For blue America, the election of Barack Obama, the first African American president, symbolized the culmination of the political and cultural transformations that began in the 1960s. For red America, Obama's election was an affront, a confirmation of the fact that the political power and cultural authority of conservative Christians were inexorably shrinking, as non-White people became an ever-larger share of the population and cultural liberalization continued to undermine traditional values. As Michael Gerson, an anti-Donald Trump conservative who served as speechwriter to George W. Bush, observes in his column in the *Washington Post*, "A factual debate can be adjudicated. Policy differences can be compromised. Even an ideological conflict can be bridged or transcended. But if our differences are an expression of our identities—rural vs. urban, religious vs. secular, nationalist vs. cosmopolitan—then political loss threatens a whole way of life."²

National security expert Michael Vlahos, writing in *American Conservative*, argues that the effect of this kind of identity-based conflict "is to condition the whole of society to believe that an existential clash is coming, that all must choose, and that there are no realistic alternatives to a final test of wills." Opinion polls taken before the 2020 election showed that 36 percent of Republicans and 33 percent of Democrats believed there would be *some* justification for using violence to achieve their party's goals. As many as 20 percent of Republicans and 19 percent of Democrats thought there would be "a great deal" of justification" if their party were to lose the election. Given these terms of conflict, it is easy to see why so many political commentators have compared our era to the decade before the Civil War.³

Each side in our culture war appeals to American history to explain and justify its beliefs about who we are and the purposes for which our political community exists. They share the same body of historical referents, the stories we have accepted as symbols of our heritage. These constitute our national mythology, an essential element of the culture that sustains the modern nation-state. It defines *nationality*, the system of beliefs that allows a diverse and contentious population, dispersed over a vast and varied country, to think of itself as a community and form a broad political consensus. It provides models of patriotic

action that enable the nation's people to imagine ways of responding to crises in the name of a common good. The irony and peril of our situation is that the myths and symbols that have traditionally united Americans have become the slogans and banners of a cultural civil war.

The crisis we face is not an immediate threat, like Southern secession in 1861, the Great Depression in 1930, or the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Rather, it arises from problems endemic to the modern social and economic order: the economic and social disruptions caused by the globalization of the economy, the extreme inequality between the very rich and the middle and working classes, the growing racial and ethnic diversity of our people, the enduring effects of racial injustice, and the profound challenges posed by global warming and climate change. These persistent and interlocking problems cannot be resolved unless we can reestablish a broad consensus on the meaning of American nationality and the purposes of patriotic action. Failing that, disorder and dysfunction will become the normal condition of our politics, and our future as a civil society and a nation-state will be in danger.

A Great Disorder turns to America's foundational myths to expose the deep structures of thought and belief that underlie today's culture wars. The first half of the book describes the historical evolution of the foundational myths that are most central to our national mythology. These are the Myth of the Frontier, which uses the history of colonial settlement and westward expansion to explain our national character and our spectacular economic growth; the Myth of the Founding, which sanctifies the establishment of our national government and its foundational texts, the revolutionary Declaration of Independence, and the countervailing legal structures of the Constitution; the Myths of the Civil War, which offer conflicting versions of the moral and political crisis that nearly destroyed the nation; and the Myth of the Good War, which celebrates the nation's emergence as a multiracial and multiethnic democracy, as well as a world power. The second half of the book shows how these myths have played through the culture war politics and the multiple crises that have shaken American society since the 1990s.

This book is based on more than fifty years of research on the creation and development of American national myths, which began with my study of the colonial origins of the Myth of the Frontier, *Regeneration through Violence* (1973). In *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (1985), I traced the evolution of the original myth into a fable of imperial expansion and “bonanza” capitalism, and described the interaction of the Frontier Myth with mythic responses to the Civil War and Reconstruction. That study culminated with the publication of *Gunfighter Nation:*

The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America (1992), which dealt with the transformations of national myth under the pressures of massive immigration, the Depression and World War II, the cultural transformations of the 1960s, and the emergence of mass media, especially movies and television. In *Lost Battalions: The Great War and the Crisis of American Nationality* (2005), I looked beyond the Myth of the Frontier to consider the ways in which military mobilization in the twentieth century compelled Americans to broaden and reframe their national myth, and extend their definition of nationality to include hitherto marginalized racial and ethnic minorities.

Why National Myths Matter

Nation-states are a political innovation that began to replace dynastic and feudal systems of governance in seventeenth-century Europe, organized by elites to co-opt the power of the emerging middle classes and bring diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups to think of themselves as a single “people,” under a common legal regime. Although nation-states have taken the form of monarchies, dictatorships, and republics—and everything in between—all depend for legitimacy on cultural mechanisms that maintain broad popular consent. To win that consent, to get culturally diverse people to identify as members of a single polity, the political classes developed national mythologies: semifictional or wholly imaginary histories of the origins of their people and territories, which would enable Provençals, Bretons, and Franks to see themselves as French, or Bavarians, Prussians, and Swabians as German. They created what Benedict Anderson called “imagined communities”—or, as Immanuel Wallerstein has it, “fictive ethnicities.”⁴

No modern nation is more indebted to, or dependent on, its myths than the United States of America. The ethnic origins of our people are the most diverse of any nation. Our myths have to work for the descendants of Indigenous Americans and the settlers who dispossessed them; for the heirs of masters and of the enslaved; for those whose ancestors came centuries ago and those who arrived yesterday; for Yiddish-speaking Jews and Sicilian Italians, Germans and Irish, Brahmins and Dalits, Shia and Sunni, Turks and Armenians; for a public divided by differences of class, culture, provincial loyalties, religion, and interest.

The nation is everywhere and nowhere. We are born to our families and the communities to which they belong, but we have to learn to think of ourselves as spiritual descendants of ancestors not related to us by blood—imaginary ancestors, made kindred by our participation in a shared and ongoing history.

The teaching is done through organized public rituals, in schools provided (mostly) by the state, and by mass media organized to address a national public. The result of this cultural work is to establish a public consensus about a common “American” history: the idea that we belong to a single society, continuous in time, that we are heirs to a common past and bear responsibility for a common future. When that consensus breaks down, or splits into warring camps, it limits or frustrates our ability to act as a People for an idea of the common good.

As I use the term, myths are the stories—true, untrue, half-true—that effectively evoke the sense of nationality and provide an otherwise loosely affiliated people with models of patriotic action. Patriotism in this context is the political expression of nationality. It is not simply loyalty to the state, but the acting out of a particular understanding of why that state exists and for what purposes. It entails a distinct set of understandings about the nation’s history, which see its past as the necessary prelude to a certain kind of future or destiny.

Nationality is the concept that defines full membership in the “fictive ethnicity” of the nation-state. It is both a set of publicly accepted standards and a subjective state of mind—the sense of belonging to the society and of sharing fully in its culture. Ethnonationalist states restrict full membership (officially or in practice) to those who belong to the dominant ethnic or racial group. This is the case, or tendency, in countries like Japan, Russia, Turkey, and Hungary. Others (France and the United States are prime examples) have adopted a “civic” model of nationality, which allows immigrants to become active citizens when they have met certain basic requirements, such as learning the language and the laws, and taking an oath of allegiance. The strictness and limiting function of civic standards vary from country to country, and within countries from one period to another. US immigration and naturalization policy changed from “open” to highly restricted in the 1920s, to more broadly “open” again in 1965, to restrictive under the Trump administration.

The concept of civic (or civil) religion, developed by Robert Bellah and his associates in the 1960s, is a useful way of describing the core ideological values carried by American national myth. Its principal features are a reverence for the Constitution; a belief in individual rights; a positive attitude toward religion in general and Christianity in particular, coupled with religious toleration; a commitment to “free enterprise”; and a government that interferes as little as possible with civil society.⁵ But the principles of civic religion can be stated as propositions to be argued. Recasting those principles as myth puts them beyond argument. Myth does not argue its ideology; it tells a story and

equates that story with history, as if it were undeniable fact. Moreover, myths are not only versions of the past—they are symbolic models that are used to interpret and respond to a present crisis. When myth-histories are invoked as analogies to some present question, we immediately understand how the speaker wants us to respond to the situation. “Our political conflicts are like the Civil War.” (Radicals on both sides are destroying the nation.) “Space is the new frontier.” (Develop it!) “The 9/11 attack is like Pearl Harbor.” (Go to war to avenge it.) National myths transform the principles of civil religion into scripts, in which believers see themselves as actors on a historical stage, fulfilling—or failing to achieve—the nation’s historical destiny.

Public awareness of the role of national myth, and of its increasingly embattled state, has been growing. In 2012 the editors of *Daedalus*, the journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, devoted a whole issue to the question, “Is there an American narrative and what is it?” The responses of scholars in several disciplines expressed a common concern: “Every nation requires a story—or many stories, which taken together form a national narrative—about its origins, a self-defining mythos that says something about the character of the people and how they operate in the larger world and among each other.” And “Americans, having no ethnic uniformity, depend on myths, which lend an aura of destiny to our collective aspirations.” But there was no agreement among the contributors as to what that “mythos” was or ought to be. The collection, taken as a whole, expressed a troubled sense of slippage and disparity.⁶

That disparity has developed into the intense partisan and cultural divisions that have been characterized as the “culture war.” David Brooks, conservative columnist for the *New York Times*, sees the United States as suffering from a “national identity crisis” arising from the fact that “different groups see themselves living out different national stories” and therefore “feel they are living in different nations.” William Smith, writing in *American Conservative* in 2018, saw blue and red America interpreting the “national story through different symbolic mythologies,” leading them to embrace “two diametrically opposed civic religions,” one libertarian and the other tending toward socialism. There is a “Civil War on America’s horizon,” he concluded: “All that’s required now is a spark.”⁷

How National Myths Are Formed

American culture is rich in myths of all sorts. For immigrants and their descendants, the coming-to-America story is their origin myth. The South is still marked by its history of slavery, secession, and Civil War; westerners by their

history of settlement and the struggle over rights to public lands and natural resources. Black people and Mexican Americans have their own myths of oppression and Exodus-themed escapes, of trickster ploys and *corrido* outlaws who defend the poor. Beyond this, Hollywood is in the business of fabricating mythologies for the commercial market through the creation of story genres and franchises. Two of these, the Western and the Platoon Movie, became the basis of modern national myths; others, like the current wave of superhero franchises, create mythic fables for imaginary worlds.

“The American Dream” is a compendium of many different beliefs about American life, which we invoke in rags-to-riches or log cabin-to-White House fables, or tales of immigrants seeking religious or political freedom and economic opportunity. Some such fables are historical, others present-day; some represent the American Dream as individual, others see it as a collective aspiration. There is no single master story that grounds the Dream in a *particular* history and links it to a *specific* idea about the power and purpose of the state, so it does not function as a national myth.

Any well-remembered event will have its myth: a story and set of symbols whose interpretation becomes standardized through repetition. Rhetorical tags or memes referring to “Valley Forge” or “the Alamo” will remind most Americans of patriotic endurance and sacrifice. “Custer’s Last Stand” evokes the possibility of a disastrous reversal of fortune, “Gettysburg” a decisive moment of supreme moral and military crisis. The same is true of more recent episodes like the appeal for a more inclusive community in Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, or the surge of patriotic unity roused by “9/11.”

When we speak of national myths, we refer not to single episodes or stories such as these but to broad and consistent patterns in storytelling, which directly address the fundamental character and purposes of the American nation-state. Such myths arise in response to existential crises in the life of the nation, events that test society’s ability to react and adapt to the contingencies of history. They deal with ultimate questions about the meaning and purpose of national life. We invoke those myths, and bring them to bear, when our fundamental values are at stake.⁸

No one storyteller, however great their power, can create a myth. Stories told by people become mythic through a process of repetition and accretion. Like the pearl in the oyster, stories gather around areas of persistent irritation and conflict. In nearly every phase of US history, we can observe the recurrent conflict between individual rights and state power, or between egalitarian ideals and persistent racism, or between market freedom and the public interest. The traditions we inherit, for all their seeming coherence, are a registry of old

conflicts, rich in internal contradictions and alternative political visions, to which we ourselves continually make additions. The more vital and enduring the problem, the more powerful and enduring the myth.

Because they encapsulate perennial conflicts, myths are always partially open-ended. The struggles they depict are never fully resolved. They invite us, as believers, to complete the *unfinished business* of destiny left to us by our heroes. By leaving the struggle imperfectly resolved, they also ask us to imagine *alternative histories*, what the nation might have been like if Lincoln had lived, or the Confederacy had won, or Native Americans had succeeded in keeping the wilderness wild. Myths thus preserve, in some form, the values of those who were historically defeated, keeping open the possibility of change.

Implicit in every myth is a theory of historical cause and effect: an explanation of the forces that shaped the historical past that, if properly understood, would give us the power to control the present and future. This is what enables myth to function as a script for action, to promote imaginative responses to present crises.⁹

How Myths Function: Mythological Thinking

Once a myth is well established, new crises can be interpreted by recognizing analogies between current events and the scenarios of the myth, and recalling the historical memories the myth embodies—a process I call mythological thinking. Although it involves a poetic leap rather than rational analysis, mythological thinking can help us imagine effective responses to a crisis and to see those responses as acts of patriotism. Leaders may actually think mythologically when developing policies in response to a crisis, and they will typically deploy mythological thinking as a mechanism for producing *consent*. If the public recognizes and accepts the myth scenario as a valid analogy for the present crisis, it will consent to political measures that conform to that scenario.

When the thinking is creative and based on an understanding of both past and present, our use of myth may help us imagine and legitimize effective responses to new crises. However, it is often the case that mythic precedents *constrain* our ability to understand and respond to unprecedented crises, and provide a limited path of action. In times of great fear and anger, the invocation of myth can lock public consciousness into a preset pattern of thought and action, so that we respond to an imagined past rather than a present reality. When the 9/11 terrorist attacks were compared to Pearl Harbor, and Iraq's Saddam Hussein to Adolf Hitler, the analogy to World War II gave Americans a clear understanding

of how their leaders perceived the danger and what kind of response would be forthcoming. But the analogy was misconceived, and the resulting invasion of Iraq was a disaster not anticipated by the historical model.

A culture's heritage of myth can also provide instrumentalities through which people can transform their way of thinking and acting. Lincoln at Gettysburg reframed the nation's understanding of the constitutional order when he characterized the Founders' creation as "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." When Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, he was framing the modern civil rights movement not as a disruption but as the continuation of Lincoln's Civil War, when the aspiration to racial equality was seen as intrinsic to the preservation of the national union.

We use our myths to guide us in moments of crisis. But when we do so, we test their validity against existential reality. In a healthy society, each test produces an adaptation or adjustment of the mythic paradigm, to keep its premises in balance with the conditions we actually face. The fabrication and revision of mythology is an ongoing activity, a coping mechanism of organized society. When a mythic paradigm fails, the consequences can be serious. There have been several such episodes of crisis and readjustment in the course of American history. The most notable of these occurred in the 1850s, when the commitment of North and South to antithetical myths tore the nation apart. The best that can happen is represented by the transformation of American myth during and after World War II, when the Good War Myth redefined America as a multiethnic, multiracial democracy united in struggle against the ethnonationalist tyrannies of Nazi Germany and the Japanese Empire.¹⁰

National myths themselves have a history—that is, they change through time. The longest-lived mythologies are the highly evolved products of numerous crises of belief and revision. That is why a crisis in the state of public myth signals a potential rupture of the web of beliefs and practices that holds nations together.

The Rupture and Repair of National Mythology

America's crisis of national culture is part of a larger phenomenon. In the aftermath of the Cold War, it appeared that nation-states and nationalism were in decline, as the rapid globalization of economic networks reduced the power of national governments to regulate or otherwise set the terms of trade. Francis Fukuyama and other social scientists saw this as the "end of history," since the political, religious, and ideological conflicts that had hitherto shaped world

history were now subsumed by a dominant neoliberal capitalist order. For neoliberal purists, the new order would dispense with national sovereignty in favor of a world governed by market operations. With the collapse of Soviet Communism and China's apparent transition to a market economy, there was not much strength in the Old Left vision of a world governed by an international working class, acting for humanity as a whole.¹¹

The fallacy of the globalist view became clear in the aftermath of the 2008 banking crisis and the Great Recession that followed. A wave of nationalist movements espousing populist ideologies swept across the industrialized world, reflecting the deep discontent of working- and lower-middle-class people with the long-term decline of wages and economic security, the pace and direction of cultural change, and the effects of increased immigration on both culture and wages. The Brexit campaign that carried the United Kingdom out of the European Union, the rise of France's National Front and of Hindu nationalism in India, the Fidesz takeover in Hungary, and the MAGA movement in the United States are cases in point.

In America, the division of power between states and the federal government has traditionally served to compartmentalize such movements. But the hyperpartisanship and culture-war rhetoric that now dominate American discourse reflect the nationalization of American politics: the absorption of what once were distinctively local political cultures into national movements exclusively identified with one national party or the other, each with its own nationwide media complex.¹²

For better or worse, the nation-state remains the most powerful political structure in the contemporary world. It is the largest form of political community that has proved capable of maintaining civil order, and some form of consensual governance, among populations that are socially complex and ethnically diverse. It is the only political structure with the authority to regulate the domestic operations of capital for its own people and, in concert with like powers, to regulate the forces of globalization in the interests of humanity.

Patriotism is a concept to which some respond skeptically, because it has too frequently been distorted by nationalist chauvinism and exploited for partisan gain. Samuel Johnson's famous definition of patriotism as "the last refuge of a scoundrel" is all too apt. But patriotism is the active principle of consensual government, the sentiment that expresses the consent of the governed, without which republican and democratic government is impossible. It is an essential act of social and political imagination, in which the people of a state see themselves as a community, acting through chosen leaders and united for self-defense and mutual service.

In recent years, scholars, public intellectuals, and serious journalists have produced a spate of studies aimed at explaining the rise of illiberal populist nationalism and exploring ways of reconciling “patriotism,” and the defense of nationality, with liberal values. *The Case for Nationalism*, by the conservative Rich Lowry, argues for a return to traditional nationalism, which has made us powerful and free. Liah Greenfeld’s *Nationalism: A Short History* and Amitai Etzioni’s *Reclaiming Patriotism* try to find paths to a new kind of liberal nationalism through an examination of the history and variety of nation-state organization. Jill Lepore’s *This America* is a plea for historians to rethink how they write (or fail to write) national history, arguing that the way we tell our national story shapes both our sense of membership or belonging and our understanding of what patriotic action can and should be. These studies are, in effect, a call for the revision and renewal of national mythology. They are right to see the loss of a common national story as central to the contemporary crisis of politics and culture.¹³

But a new national myth cannot be fabricated on demand or revised at a stroke. We first have to understand the nature and roots of the myths that are actually operative, as well as the processes through which they have evolved. It is certainly true that national myths, here as elsewhere, have contributed to the development of chauvinist and ethnonationalist movements. But there is more to national mythology, and certainly elements of American national myth have made possible a culture that has become increasingly open to diversity of all kinds and newly sensitized to bigotry and injustice.

The Core Myths

From the country’s beginnings as a collection of colonies or settler states, the central question shaping the formation of an American nationality has been whether it was possible—or even desirable—to form a single political society out of diverse racial, religious, and ethnic elements. In colonial and early national times, numerous Native American tribes lived side by side with settlements that included Africans and Europeans of several nationalities—English, Welsh, Scots, Irish, Scots-Irish, Dutch, German, Spanish, French Huguenot, Sephardic Jews. Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the list expanded to include every race and ethnicity on planet Earth. So the reconciliation of diversity and nationality has historically been a central problem of our political culture. It has become the most significant line of cleavage in modern politics, between the White ethnonationalism of the Trump-led Right and the racial and ethnic pluralism of the Democratic Center-Left.

The central conflicts in the evolution of American patriotism have concerned the proper role and ultimate goals of the state in shaping the domestic social order and pursuing the national interest in a world of nations. In both spheres, ideas and issues have been shaped by the extraordinary scale and rapidity of the nation's geographical expansion and economic growth, and its rise from colonial outpost to Great Power. In the domestic sphere, the central questions have concerned the balance between state power and private enterprise, and the role of government in the emerging conflicts among economic interests. On a deeper level, these evolved into a conflict between contending concepts of social justice and individual rights, and of the proper role of government in shaping the conditions of social life.

Four myths have historically been the most crucial to Americans' understanding of what their nation is, where it came from, and what it stands for: the Myth of the Frontier; the Myth of the Founding; three different Myths of the Civil War; and the Myth of the Good War. To fully understand the ideological charge that each myth carries, we have to look closely at its historical origins. That will be the focus of the first part of *A Great Disorder*.

The Myth of the Frontier is the oldest and most enduring of these myths, and the only one that did not arise from a singular crisis. The stories that constitute the Frontier Myth are legion, appearing in every medium and many genres—histories, personal narratives, political speeches, popular fiction, movies—and they refer to episodes from colonial times to the heyday of westward expansion and the jungle wars of the twentieth century. The Myth of the Frontier locates our national origin in the experience of settlers establishing settlements in the wilderness of the New World. It enshrines a distinctively American concept of capitalist development: America has enjoyed extraordinary growth and progress, and development as a democracy, thanks to the discovery and exploitation of abundant natural resources, or “bonanzas,” beyond the zone of settlement and established order. However, winning the frontier also required “savage wars” to dispossess and subjugate the Indigenous peoples, which made racial distinction and exclusion part of our original concept of nationality. In the Myth of the Frontier, these wars transform individual frontiersmen into heroes, and the American people into members of a heroic nationality, in a process I have called *regeneration through violence*. The Frontier Myth combines bonanza economics with regeneration through violence to explain the origin of America's exceptional character and unparalleled prosperity.

The Myth of the Founding centers on the creation of our political state, which is seen as the work of an extraordinarily intelligent and virtuous set of

men of European descent, the Founding Fathers. Certain preeminent heroes stand out—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin—each with a story that celebrates his personal character and his moral and political principles. The story of the Founding is so much a given of cultural memory that its meaning is most often invoked by reference to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, now sanctified as national scripture. Although these texts are symbols of national unity, they are critically different in character and embody the contradictions at the heart of our ideal of free government: one a revolutionary declaration of principles that transcend law; the other the basis of a fixed and stable governmental and legal structure.

The Civil War would put the Myth of the Founding to its most severe test. That conflict—which threatened America’s survival as a nation—led to the creation of three conflicting mythic traditions. The first of these is the Liberation Myth, with its focus on emancipation. It sees the Civil War as an ordeal of *regeneration through violence*, which not only preserved Lincoln’s “government of the people, by the people, for the people” but produced what, in the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln called a “new birth of freedom” that included formerly enslaved Black people. A related Unionist variant is the “White Reunion,” which sees the war as a conflict between brothers who were divided by politics but reunited through respectful recognition of each other’s courage and devotion to their cause—a reconciliation that minimizes the importance of slavery and rejects Black claims to civic equality. Opposed to both of these Unionist myths is the Southern Myth of the Lost Cause, which celebrates the virtues of the Old South and justifies the struggle to restore its traditional culture and the structures of White supremacy. The Liberation Myth would shape Reconstruction and ongoing efforts to build a multiracial democracy. The Lost Cause would overthrow Reconstruction and establish the violent and oppressive regime of Jim Crow, an outcome tacitly ratified by Northerners who embraced White Reunion. As the North and West began to experience mass immigration and labor-capital conflicts between 1875 and 1930, Lost Cause ideology would shape the formulation of a new, ethnonationalist concept of American citizenship in which White Protestant identity was fundamental.

In the Frontier Myth, the Myth of the Founding, and the Civil War Myths, American nationality is defined as White, Christian, and largely northern European. That conception of American nationality would be challenged by a series of linked and overlapping crises in the twentieth century: the Great War, the Depression, and World War II. These crises—especially the two wars—compelled the nation’s political and cultural elites to broaden the concept of

American nationality and to embrace on terms of equality racial and ethnic minorities that had hitherto been marginalized or excluded from the body politic. The result was the creation of a new national myth, the Myth of the Good War, which used the war-movie convention of the multiethnic “platoon” to celebrate a diverse American nationality and linked the achievement of unity to our success as a world-liberating Great Power and Cold War “leader of the free world.” It also created the basis for public acceptance of the civil rights movement and the overthrow of Jim Crow.

The postwar civil rights movement challenged the racist presumptions that were so fundamental to our national myths. It would cue a series of cultural transformations, including a wave of “liberation” movements affecting race, gender, and sexuality, which coincided with radical changes in popular culture and music, and in “manners” generally. It would also produce a major movement in universities calling for the wholesale revision of our ways of reading and understanding national history. With hindsight, we can see these developments as the formation of what might be called a “Myth of the Movement,” in which the nonviolent victory of civil rights provided a script for transformations that blue America has generally seen as progressive, and red America as the cause of national degeneracy. The Myth of the Movement is only a potential addition to the repertoire of national myth, but that potential has made it a battlefield in the culture wars.

Although the chapters in the first half of the book relate the development of myths to political and economic developments in particular periods, they are not thoroughgoing studies of political history. Rather, they are designed to show how events were organized into story patterns, which gained mythic force through their propagation in public media and systems of education. References in the first half of the book are therefore drawn from my own prior research and from the best recent scholarly books on each period, which describe broad patterns of development, while the discussion is focused on the formation of mythic narratives.

The second half of the book analyzes the use of national myths in the culture-war politics of the past fifty years. It draws on both scholarly literature and a range of primary sources, including political speeches and manifestos, contemporary journalism, and the popular arts (especially film and television). These chapters deal with the ways in which the various national myths have shaped (and been reshaped by) responses to a series of political and economic crises.

The discussion of our culture war begins with the advent of “culture war conservatism,” announced by Pat Buchanan in his campaign against George H. W.

Bush for the 1992 presidential nomination. The movement was rooted in the combination of populist reaction against the economic strains of the globalized economy and the anxieties of conservative White Christians at their loss of cultural authority and political power. The latter strain would eventually lead to the formation of a Christian nationalist movement calling for the use of government power to establish a purified moral regime. As they merged to form the popular base of MAGA, both strains of the movement would appeal for historical authority to a Christian version of the Myth of the Founding and, above all, to the Lost Cause Myth that finds national salvation in the overthrow of liberalism and restoration of the traditional social and cultural hierarchies.

After the twentieth century, the “savage war” aspect of the Myth of the Frontier would be reinvigorated as an organizing principle of George W. Bush’s Global War on Terror, and the related domestic issues of race and immigration, while the emerging conflict over global warming pitted the imperatives of oil-based bonanza economics against the concerns of ecologists. Finally, the Obama presidency saw the gun rights movement become the nexus of several strains of cultural conservatism and national myth: the fetishization of the 2nd Amendment, which first linked unregulated gun rights to libertarian economics, then asserted the insurrectionary right of “2nd Amendment remedies” to block or overturn government action—the principle behind Frontier vigilantism and the antigovernment violence of the Lost Cause.

The concluding chapters will show that the use of myth by MAGA is more than a one-man show. Rather, it arises from deep roots in American culture and ideological traditions woven into our national myths. As such, I will argue that MAGA is a movement akin to Fascism, but with authentically American roots, combining the ethnonationalist racism of the Lost Cause, an insurrectionist version of the Founding, and the peculiar blend of violent vigilantism and libertarian economics associated with the Frontier.

Reading American history through the lens of national myths will highlight certain critical themes that run through our belief systems and the language of our politics, allowing us to see the connections between seemingly different aspects of our political culture—guns, oil, race, nostalgia, nature, capitalism. It may help explain some of the contradictions of our current politics. Why have gun rights become a signature issue for twenty-first-century conservatives? Why do exponents of American nationalism wave the Confederate battle flag? Why does racial animus often outweigh considerations of economic interest in our elections? How does our history of slave owning affect our beliefs about the relations of labor and capital? Why do we keep opening wilderness areas

to oil drilling, even though seven in ten Americans believe that global warming is a menace?

Although we'll examine the conduct of several administrations and consider important changes in the nation's economy, this is not a history of policy, or an analysis of the modern capitalist system. Rather, it is an analysis of the belief structures that *underlie* policymaking and shape our understanding of capitalism. My hope is that this study will help explain how and why historical legacies in mythic form have constrained our responses to the problems of global warming, racism, and economic change.

The American nation was born at a time when culture was being reshaped by the rapid growth of print media and literacy. The nation's development went hand in hand with the expansion of mass-circulation media. Journalism is the oldest and in some ways most critical of these forms, and a primary locus of myth development, but popular fiction is also a central feature of mass culture. Certain story types become so popular that they evolve into formulas or genres; and many of these coalesce around operative myths. The Western movie and its antecedent literary forms are the classic case, but we will look at a number of other genres as we follow the development of national mythology.

American mythology is suffused at every level with the problem of race. To some extent, this is true of all national mythologies. When European nation-states took their modern form in the nineteenth century, their national myths invoked folkloric tribal roots, often called "racial stocks," which lent nationality an imaginary genetic basis. But the settlers who formed the American nation-state came from different European nations, and the state grew in power by displacing Indigenous people and enslaving Black Africans. Hence the most enduring line between those who belonged to the nation and those who did not was drawn not by language, history, or religion (as in Europe) but by color. The contested meanings of the color line have been fundamental to the shaping of American nationality, politics, and mythology.¹⁴

The traditional forms of national myth were developed by and for a society whose power structures were dominated by White men. In consequence, the balance of gender roles in these myths is radically unequal—men are at the center of the narratives, women at the margins. It follows that a shift in that balance—when new invocations of myth give central roles and agency to non-White people and women—significant social and cultural change may be occurring. As we'll see, changes of that kind began to occur across a range of expressive genres in the 1950s and 1960s.

The culture war of our time can be understood as a clash between conflicting versions of the myths that define our national identity. The dysfunction of our

politics and our continued coherence as a nation will depend on our ability to reconcile that conflict, and that will require a reform or revision of our lexicon of myths. The myths we live by arose from, and connect us to, the dark and bloody ground of a history in which slavery shares the space with freedom, dispossession with progress, hatred with heritage. No new or revised mythology can unite us if it does not enable us to recognize and begin to deal with the racial and class conflicts that have divided us. But critical analysis of national myth by itself changes nothing. What will be needed are new ways of telling the American story in order to redefine the nation as the common ground of an extraordinarily diverse people. In the Conclusion I will sketch the form such a story might take.

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