

Chapter Seven: Red, White and Black

When the American opens a...door in his psychology, there is a dangerous open gap, dropping hundreds of feet... he will then be faced with an Indian or Negro shadow.

– Carl Jung

As long as we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord. – Increase Mather

Cut loose from the earth's soul, they insisted on purchase of its soil, and like all orphans they were insatiable. It was their destiny to chew up the world and spit out a horribleness that would destroy all primary peoples. – Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*

...the world's fairest hope linked with man's foulest crime. – Herman Melville

...the only good Indians are the dead Indians. – Theodore Roosevelt

There are no kings inside the gates of Eden. – Bob Dylan

The Origins of American Innocence

What an ambiguous and conflicted mix of crusading moralism, anxious consumerism, cutthroat competition, aggressive practicality, racist brutality, apocalyptic fear, arrogant optimism, cheerful naiveté, willful ignorance, celebrity worship, generous goodwill and rollicking bad taste constitutes our public lives! The myth of innocence holds it all together.

In attempting to understand myth, language can fail us. We all have a deep, innate need for authentic narratives that will give us meaning and guide us in the eternal quest to know who we are and why we have been born. Lacking them, we settle for their “toxic mimics,” the stories that define us in terms of who we are not and rationalize our otherwise unjustifiable actions. Each type of narrative is a form of myth.

One purpose of myth – Campbell's *sociological* function – is reconciling the gulf between ideals and realities. It temporarily resolves ambivalence, links us spontaneously to the priorities of the state and determines our reactions when someone questions our unexamined habits and beliefs.

In simple terms, this type of myth equals ideology plus narrative. *Stories* help us digest the ideology. Myths determine perception, like the lenses of a pair of glasses. They are not what we see,

but what we see *with*. We can't see outside our bubble (but outsiders can see us.) We give our attention to one set of possibilities rather than another, and our intentions and dreams follow. So *myth creates fact*. Indeed, *myth trumps fact*.

We draw stories from our past and abstract them into evocative icons (Plymouth Rock, the Alamo, etc.) that contain the essential elements of our worldview. They are so obvious that they never have to be “explained.” They transform history into sacred legends that describe reality to us and *prescribe* our choices and behavior within acceptable limits. “Myth,” writes Richard Slotkin, “is history successfully disguised as archetype.”ⁱ

To understand the sociological power of myth, consider some questions. Why do millions of Americans who support unions, environmental protection, progressive taxation, women's equality and universal health care continue to vote Republican, or still believe that Saddam Hussein caused 9/11? Why, with 12,000 nuclear warheads, do we demonize nations that develop their own? Why do most of us assume – wrongly – that well-educated Americans are more anti-war than less-educated people? Why does the American flag appear in front of every public school, at every university commencement speech, at the New York Stock Exchange and at most auto dealerships, mortuaries and *churches*? Why do both civil rights activists and the Ku Klux Klan carry it? Why do we sing the national anthem before ball games?

In totalitarian societies, the dictator's version of reality must be obeyed or else. Americans, however, *believe* the myths underlying our fascination with innocence. When nearly everyone shares the common mythic language of “Americanism,” vigorous argument is encouraged – but only within the limits imposed by unstated doctrinal orthodoxy. In reality, the corporate-owned media carefully frame all controversies to minimize real debate.

Yet this still doesn't get to the heart of the issue. Why did *New York Times* writers *believe* that impoverished Sandinistas threatened us? Why do federally subsidized academics *believe* their odes to free markets? If intellectuals are absolutely convinced of benign American intentions, what can we expect from the rest of us? A mythic framework holds it all together.

The myth of innocence justified the original colonization effort. Later, in changing conditions, it helped account for America's unique and rapid expansion and its worldwide economic and cultural domination. Though it must change periodically to do so, its essential elements remain. However, seeing it as *only* justifying racism and imperialism, we forget that millions of people still sacrifice everything to come here, hoping to start anew. We lose the mystical interpretation of our myth, as well as the imagination necessary to transform it.

Searching for the Other

Europe's invasion of the Americas destroyed "countless tens of millions of people," writes historian David Stannard.ⁱⁱ The *conquistadors* had barely recovered from three centuries of crusades and 700 years of Muslim control in Spain. To a great extent Christianity defined itself in terms of this *external* Other who, seemingly forever, had threatened its borders. Soon after ousting them, however, Europe imploded into a century of religious warfare. Catholics and Protestants slaughtered each other with the same fury that they'd inflicted upon Muslims and Jews, Europe's *internal* Other. In the same year that Spain expelled the Jews, Columbus discovered America, bringing concepts of racial purity that had been honed in the crusades.

For generations, the Inquisition – Catholicism's ritual of purification – had produced a constant state of fear across Europe. A Protestant version took strong root in America, and it periodically re-surfaces in epidemics of scapegoating. Inquisitions are characterized by *highly imaginative cruelty perpetrated for the good of the accused*. As Blaise Pascal wrote, "Men never do evil so fully and cheerfully as when we do it out of conscience." This idea of "therapeutic coercion" can be traced back to St. Augustine, who wrote of "forcibly returning the heretics to the real banquet of the Lord." More recently, American officers in Viet Nam claimed that they had to "destroy the village in order to save it."

Linguistic research indicates that some languages have only one color distinction: black and white. In languages with a third color term, that term is invariably red. How ironic that over time, in a curious blend of history and archetype, the American soul projected itself in *red, white and black images*. White, of course, speaks to us of our national sense of innocence, while in our language and mythology, black and red came to represent the "Others" who threaten us from within and from without.

The Paranoid Imagination

European fear and loathing of the Other stems from an ancient, paranoid imagination. The Old Testament repeatedly celebrates genocidal yet redemptive violence: "The righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked."ⁱⁱⁱ Medieval art depicts the Last Judgment with detailed scenes of naked bodies subjected to (almost) inconceivable torture. The blessed, however, will *enjoy* these scenes. Saint Thomas Aquinas declared that in Heaven, "...a perfect view is granted them of the tortures of the damned." Eighteenth-century

evangelist Jonathan Edwards agreed: “The sight of hell-torments will exalt the happiness of the saints forever.”

The paranoid imagination combines eternal vigilance, constant anxiety, obsessive voyeurism, creative sadism, contempt for the erotic and an impenetrable wall of innocence. We can find it at least as far back as Rome, where authorities claimed that Christians: “... burn with incestuous passions...with unspeakable lust they copulate in random unions...”

This heritage was 3,000 years old when sixteenth century revolts against church corruption – but not its brutality – set the tone of life in British America (Martin Luther initiated the Reformation in 1517, six months before the Spanish first attacked Mexico). Protestantism’s new way to live acceptably to God – the “calling” – was no longer through renunciation but by fulfilling worldly obligations. It gave capitalists a new freedom; they no longer felt guilty about generating wealth. Recognizing “calling” in the concept of career, we note both its similarity and its profound difference from the indigenous notion of purpose. The calling is imposed by social position, while purpose comes from within.

John Calvin took the next step by emphasizing *predestination*. The unknowable, transcendent deity had decreed long before that a tiny minority – the elect – were already saved. The vast majority would never rise above their sinful nature. One was either in a state of grace or not. “Therefore,” wrote Luther, “we... deny free will altogether.” America’s foundation myth has enshrined these Pilgrims and Puritans as the first to settle the barren wilderness, even though other English settlers had arrived earlier. They put a fundamental – and fundamentalist – stamp on American consciousness: human nature was utterly corrupt, and the only escape was through grace.

Never *certain* of salvation, however, these people experienced constant anxiety. So they worked unceasingly, hoping that grace would show itself through the results of the work ethic. Calvinism replaced the external order of the church with a far stricter *internal* order. Never in history had so many people willingly imposed such restraints on themselves. Medieval peasants had created festivities as an escape from work, writes Barbara Ehrenreich, but “the Puritan embraced work as an escape from terror.”^{iv} Some believed in preparing themselves for the conversion experience that might *prove* their salvation, but only after utterly debasing their sense of self-worth. They were at war with the self yet unable to escape it.

Their only respite from the weight of original sin was to project their guilt onto others. So they defined *loss of self-control* as the basis for all sins, and their answer to the perceived disorder in the world was unrelenting discipline. Once converted, they turned their critical energies (formerly directed upon themselves) into converting those who still sinned – and failing in that attempt, to eliminate them. Others believed in free will but still emphasized individual

responsibility. Either way, all worked relentlessly to glorify God, *prove* one's state of grace and make a fallen world more holy.

The Catholic Church no longer controlled them, but freedom came at a price. They could relate to God directly, but he was both more abstract (no longer accessed through Catholicism's rich visual symbolism) and more remote. It turned out that the more remote their goal, the more passionately men pursued it. And the more they strove for perfection, the less they enjoyed anything.

Christianity's hatred of the body (and the rage it engendered) reached its extreme in Puritanism. Unlike Catholics, who had assurance of salvation through works and prayer, Puritans loathed sensuality. They mistrusted (and envied) those who didn't "crucify their lusts."^v Their anxiety had few outlets, except through physical work, proselytizing – and violence. Their theology confirmed their psychology. *Revelation* was their favorite Bible passage.

Their repressed aggression – and desire – surfaced in their confrontation with the Other. The first Puritan migrations coincided with the height of the witch craze that was engulfing Europe. The English were crushing Ireland with genocidal fury and racist stereotypes that reduced the Irish to sub-human status. They constructed their sense of innocence by projecting their own savagery upon their victims.

In addition, these English Puritans were displaying another aspect of the Paranoid Imagination: the fear and hatred of *images*. Under Oliver Cromwell, they were desecrating the artwork in thousands of English churches, continuing a tradition of iconoclasm dating back to Byzantium, Islam and the Biblical hatred of idolatry. This tradition would resurface in their twentieth century crusades against pornography.

Similarly, American Puritans displaced their self-hatred by persecuting Catholics, Indians and even other Protestants. And within one generation, they became slaveholders. White supremacy, normally considered a characteristic of the southern opportunists, fit perfectly with the doctrine of predestination. By 1693 (the same year as the Salem trials), Cotton Mather was teaching blacks that they were enslaved because they were sinners. God, not their masters, had enslaved them.

With mutual love within the community but expulsion (or worse) for dissenters, they evolved a paranoid style that continues to re-surface throughout American history. The Salem witch trials reveal how the Puritans dealt with the Other within the community. Witches could be anyone, anywhere, but were generally believed to be independent women who consorted with the Devil or with the natives who worshipped him. In this paranoid atmosphere some girls became "possessed" (as in *The Bacchae*) and upset the order of careful self-control. They "named names" (as they would

in 1918, 1950 and 2001) of others – overwhelmingly women – who had bewitched them. Public executions of these scapegoats intimidated and purified the community.

The paranoid imagination seeks itself: it constantly projects its fantasies outward onto the Other and then proceeds to demonize it. Therefore, it finds conspiracies everywhere. In 1798, ministers whipped up hysteria about a tiny Masonic group. Anticipating McCarthyism by 150 years, one minister ranted: “*I have now in my possession...authenticated list of names.*” In 1835, future President John Tyler blamed abolitionism on “a reptile who had crawled from some of the sinks of Europe...to sow the seeds of discord among us.”

Propriety and cleanliness were external indications of a clean soul, and bodily needs continually reminded them of their original, corrupt nature. Since they experienced constant fear – and fantasies – of pollution, they rigidly enforced moral standards, denouncing music, theater and dance and declaring capital punishment for adultery (for women). Calvinism’s “most urgent task,” wrote sociologist Max Weber, was “the destruction of spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment.”^{vi}

Although both salvation and perdition fell on the individual, the entire community might suffer for one person’s sins; so each person was responsible for upholding group morality. Individual sin *polluted*, with consequences for all New England. Ministers addressed condemned criminals (and indirectly everyone else) with “execution sermons:”

You must be cut off by a violent and dreadful death. For indeed the anger of the Lord would fall upon this whole Country where your sin hath been committed, if you should be suffered to live.^{vii}

The Puritan was desperate to prove himself, *and* he was tightly controlled. He was obsessive-compulsive, punctual, thrifty, prudent, proper and distant. His only earthly reward was virtue, because he couldn’t allow himself to enjoy his gains. He was a literalized Apollo, sending his arrows to kill from a distance, who hated his Dionysian soul. “Puritanical” prudishness set the tone for a reserved, middle-class decorum that still endures, leading to H.L. Mencken’s sarcastic definition of Puritanism as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”

Eventually the quest for perfection turned outward, occasionally manifesting as compassion for the poor. Far more often, however, Puritan crusades targeted those groups and individuals who were perceived as unable to control their bodily desires. Originally having emigrated for religious freedom, they enforced a brutal uniformity, even executing several Quakers.

What did Puritans repress? How do we know our contemporary Puritans? Remember Pentheus:

... if I climbed that towering fir...then I could see their shameless orgies better.

It is not simply desire, but *images* of desire, that they project upon the Other. We find so many examples of such bizarre and intimately detailed moralizing, that we must ask, *what were they so afraid of? Don't those images come from their own obsessed imaginations?*

This is fairly basic psychology, but my intention is not to reduce these people to a pathological dead-end. We must understand their genocidal projections on another level entirely, as a blundering and childish search for healing through re-connection to the Other. Some have called this “America’s Alchemical history.”^{viii}

In this fallen world, wealth distracted from life’s only purpose – glorifying God. When, however, one felt *called* to prove one’s state of salvation by acquiring wealth, such activity was acceptable, but only if one didn’t enjoy it. Here is the essential Puritan contradiction: work hard, get rich, spend little. They delayed their gratification, for rest would come only in the next world. *Waste of time* was sinful. Later, Benjamin Franklin advised everyone to become what we now call workaholics: “*Be always ashamed to catch thyself idle.*”

But this was a fateful step. While missionaries informed the Indians of a new god, Americans actually – and unconsciously – acknowledged an even stronger one. With our most common (and most unexamined) proverb – *Time is money* – Franklin made Time – *Kronos* – capitalism’s highest value. This practical asceticism made hard labor the expression of the highest ethics, and it *drove* America toward great material accomplishment. Until the advent of mid-twentieth-century consumerism, Americans believed that they established their worth in the eyes of neighbors and God through drudgery and saving. We still ask strangers, “What do you *do*?” We have always been “what we do,” as well as “not the Other,” who we often perceive as doing nothing productive. But behind Franklin’s proverbs (“The sleeping fox catches no poultry,” etc.) lies a severe judgment: one who is doing nothing must be up to no good.

The paradox of the British conquest of North America is that Puritanical asceticism eventually produced the world’s most materialistic society. The uniformity that underlies capitalist standardization of production had its foundation, wrote Weber, “in the repudiation of all idolatry of the flesh.”^{ix} The urban northeast and to a great extent all American values came to be dominated by money, because *wealth indicated spiritual grace*. The rich, by the way, had no problem with the doctrine of predestination. By displaying their wealth, they were merely showing proof of their salvation.

These beliefs spawned radical new ideas of social obligation. “Individualism in religion,” wrote historian R.H. Tawney, “led to an individualist morality.”^x As wealth became a sign of grace,

poverty – for the first time – now indicated *moral* failure. Poor people were damned by nature. Furthermore, the rich were now justified in feeling only scorn for them. Since they were lazy and sinful, *or they wouldn't be poor*, to be charitable merely encouraged idleness. It was a waste. Only later was race added to the equation. Two hundred years later, Henry Ward Beecher wrote, “God has intended the great to be great and the little to be little.” Ministers preached, “It is your duty to get rich,” and “To sympathize with a man whom God has punished for his sins... is to do wrong.” Despite many exceptions, this brutal, uniquely American contempt for poor people still justifies official neglect because it has a religious foundation. The belief has long been established in the core of the American psyche.

Britain evolved a version of capitalism without the spiritual underpinnings, because continuing persecution and civil war resulted in more emigration. Zealots continually left to maintain their purity, both diluting Europe of its Calvinists and adding to the ferment of American religiosity. Ironically, the most enthusiastic ascetics (who as Catholics might well have been monks) became the greatest moneymakers.

As generations passed and the strictly religious fervor dissipated, the competitive quest for efficiency, productivity, wealth and the self-validation they symbolized became established as our most fundamental values. This “American Dream” is so durable because, like no other myth, it promises fulfillment both in this world and the next. The obsession with self-improvement soon became the most recognizable aspect of American national character. By the 1830s the Frenchman Alexis De Toqueville wrote, “I know of no country...where the love of money has taken stronger hold on the affections of men.” Another visitor, the Englishman Charles Latrobe, claimed that, “...dollar is the word most frequently in their mouths.”

Capitalism's relentless logic eventually transformed this religious, if flawed, impulse into conspicuous consumption. Over three centuries, Americans gradually shifted from being producers to being consumers. They began by enshrining gain without pleasure and ended with addiction to “stuff.” But underneath the surface, work still equals salvation. It has been said that Europeans work to live, while Americans live to work. Journalist Lewis Lapham, however, argues that they misunderstand us: “...material objects serve as testimonials to the desired states of immateriality – not what the money buys but what the money says about our...standing in the company of the saved.”^{xi}

Now, zealots for wealth, we still suffer neurotic obsession and fear moral failure. America literalizes service to the *mater* into its toxic mimic, materialism. It judges a person either by how hard he works or by what he has accumulated; and it carries a hatred of the body lying just below

the surface of our seemingly hedonistic lifestyles. The Puritan ethic sublimated man's Dionysian nature into a poor version of the Apollonic.

Immense contradictions lay at America's foundations. The Puritan retained his asceticism long after Europeans had dropped theirs. This "individualist" demanded conformity. He was unsure of his own salvation, yet his doctrines justified his luck. Longing for the spirit, he was aggressively pragmatic. Working unceasingly, he never enjoyed himself. Loving God, he hated his body. Hoping to convert the Indians, he massacred them. And his religious retreat became an empire.

With the second major influence on early America these contradictions grow even larger.

The Predatory Imagination

The children of these Northern religious extremists amassed the first great mercantile fortunes. Southerners, however, had more worldly motivations. Their first *History of Virginia* boasted, "The chief design of all parties concerned was to fetch away the Treasure from thence, aiming more at sudden gain than to form any regular colony." Aristocrats like Sir Walter Raleigh were not interested in the city on a hill but in the golden *El Dorado* that Spaniards had been chasing for decades. "In that sense," writes Michael Ventura, "America had Las Vegas a century before it had Plymouth Rock."^{xii} Our history has been caught between the paranoid nightmares of the Puritans and the greedy, predatory fantasies of these opportunists ever since.

Outside of Spanish and French territories and the original settlers of the colony of Maryland, large numbers of Catholics didn't arrive until the 1840s. "Americans" were essentially white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant for two centuries.

The opportunists received vast tracts of free land and required large numbers of workers. Having first enslaved thousands of Indians, they convinced many British to emigrate, but treated these indentured servants harshly; only one in five lived to attain freedom. In addition, many free but desperately poor Scots-Irish arrived to work Virginia's plantations until about 1700, when the western migration extended the frontier across the Appalachian Mountains.

The masters needed so many workers because their crops, tobacco and cotton, were highly labor-intensive. These conditions led to the enslavement of 35,000-50,000 criminals and 100,000 Irish, including perhaps 20,000 poor children. The word *kidnapping* ("kid-nabbing") entered the language. Prior to 1800, perhaps two-thirds (250,000) of white colonists came as slaves.

White survivors of this brutal system needed outlets for their rage. But rather than revolting, they came to identify with their former masters. Economically insecure small landholders, they

learned to hold black slaves in contempt even if few could afford to own one, and they showed little mercy for Indians.

Whereas the northern myth involved fear of pollution by the Other, southerners originally perceived themselves in the evolving narrative of the lone hunter who learned from the natives and took what he wanted. Living alone or in isolated communities, they resisted religious structures but responded in great numbers to what historians call the “great awakenings,” and their conversion experiences seeded the optimistic energy that drove the westward expansion. Later, they formed the backbone of the Revolutionary and Confederate armies. To this day, most military officers are southerners.

So, colonial America consisted mainly of two hungry groups: grim, puritanical northerners and southerners who suffered from generations of poverty. Both shared a restless zeal, what psychologist Joel Kovel calls “...that singular transformation of body into spirit and spirit into action that is the hallmark of our civilization.”^{xiii} Both saw the land as an unparalleled opportunity for enrichment and freedom. Both digested narratives that substituted the symbolism of savage war against the natives for the class struggle. And both, like none before them, were composed of *individuals*. Geography, religion and myth were making them into solitary, isolated figures.

A New Myth

Indigenous myths, the dreams of entire cultures, emerge from the land itself and from the infinite depths of the past; no one “creates” them. Myths speak of origins, of the divine figures present at the beginning, of how the sacred breaks through into the material world. By contrast, mythic *literature* is created by specific individuals out of oral traditions, as Homer utilized stories that Greek bards had told for centuries.

Americans populated their political, religious and commercial narratives with ancestry (Columbus, the Pilgrims and the Founding Fathers), amplifying their historical experiences into literature until it assumed mythic proportions. Myth and art exerted reciprocal pressure on each other until they shaped our sense of reality. Thus, writes Slotkin, “...a national mythology may come to exercise the same unconscious appeal as the archetypal myths of which they are the variants.”^{xiv} Some use the terms “civic religion” or simply “Americanism.” Myths are ambiguous, like dreams vaguely remembered. So our most common descriptive phrase (although not coined until the 1930s) is “American Dream.”

Hearing these metaphors of national myth through popular culture, we gloss over our troubled history with illusory solutions. We have been telling ourselves these stories about ourselves all our lives. They glide through our dreams so smoothly that even liberals – *especially* liberals – rarely notice how deeply they hold us. Many, for example, lament America’s “mistakes” in Iraq and Afghanistan, yet continue to praise our “good intentions.” In speaking this way, we may easily – and this is critical – substitute Viet Nam, Nicaragua, Cuba, the Philippines, Haiti, Mexico, Chile, Iran, Guatemala, etc, for Iraq.

But myth (in Campbell’s terms, the cosmological and mystical levels of myth) points beyond the social order toward essential questions of truth, justice, beauty and purpose. We study the myth of innocence to imagine ways of bringing America back into alignment with its purpose.

When Europeans “discovered” the new world, the power of myth enveloped their images of its indigenous inhabitants. Columbus initially wavered between the “noble savage” projection (innocent, generous natives) and its opposite (sub-human, untrustworthy). Quickly, the latter won out. “Indians” were shameless, naked fornicators and idolaters. Perhaps more importantly, their notions of *ownership* condemned them: in maintaining the land collectively, they were the original red communists. “They are fit to be ruled,” wrote Columbus; they could be trained to be industrious slaves. When this prediction proved unrealistic, the Spaniards responded with genocide.

The new story described essentially *empty* land. However, wrote John Locke, “...land that is left wholly to nature is ... waste.” By the 1570s, allegorical personifications of America as a female nude appeared in European art. “Virgin” land evokes fantasies of defloration. Raleigh was clear about that: Guiana “hath yet her maydenhead.” This is deliberately constructed mythic language. The indigenous people had, of course, worked the land for centuries. And it was hardly empty. Its pre-1492 population was over 100 million. However, by 1600 epidemics had already wiped out entire native populations. The British built over fifty New England settlements on the remains of native towns.

Whites merged sexual and racial ideology to differentiate themselves from these people. Although the natives had never known prostitution or venereal disease, the process of “othering” *required* that they be perceived as unable to control themselves. Intellectuals debated whether they had souls. Some argued that they were children, to be protected and civilized, while others claimed they were “natural slaves” (Aristotle’s term), set apart by God to serve those born for more lofty pursuits.

This is America’s creation myth. It sings of people who came seeking freedom, charged with a holy mission to destroy evil, save souls, carve civilization out of darkness – *and get rich*. R.W.B. Lewis wrote that this story saw “... a divinely granted second chance for the human

race...emancipated from history... Adam before the Fall.”^{xv} It was a return to innocence – and the entire world was watching.

This new story recalled an older “heliotropic myth” in which history follows the sun, moving from the old empires of the east – China, India, Persia – toward dominance by western empires – Greece, Rome, Spain, Britain. Many were convinced that Christ would return in America and history would end. The millennium was at hand: “The Gospel hath crossed the western ocean.”

Biblical myth justified the entire adventure. Columbus called his voyages the “enterprise of Jerusalem,” and the Pilgrims saw themselves as “Israelites,” leaving Egypt/England for the “New Jerusalem.” Unfortunately, however, the Exodus story is intertwined with the original *invasion of Palestine*. Since God saved us, they reasoned, we have the sacred responsibility (have license) to seize (their) land. From the start, our stories of domination came packaged in the language of liberation. Everyone had a role to play: whites were the Chosen People, America was the Promised Land and Indians were the Philistines.

This dream-story was built up over three centuries of storytelling, preaching, oratory, fiction, poetry, textbooks, advertisements, films and television. *America* was neither South nor Central America, nor Mexico nor Canada. Its essence was that anything was possible. America, writes Jacob Needleman, “...was the future... not to be born anything at all” – an *idea* formed by unique philosophical ideals.^{xvi}

In the land of opportunity, greatness was limited only by one’s own desire. The Founding Fathers were steeped in the new humanistic philosophy; they contradicted their Puritan predecessors and declared the demise of original sin. Since then, Americans have maintained a superficial belief in the *tabula rasa*, the “clean slate” that we can fill with anything, that competes with our vestigial belief in predestination. Even now, TV commercials for the military encourage us to “be all you can be.” The cliché is effective because it hints at purpose. Assuming unlimited opportunity, however, we believe we can be anything we *want* to be. This is a characteristically inflated and innocent American misinterpretation of the indigenous teaching that we were born to be *one* thing, and that the task of soul making is to discover it.

Cooperation between northerners and southerners birthed a paradoxical mix of extreme religious and modern Enlightenment values. Man was fallen and sinful, yet he could become whatever he wanted. Indeed, in 1776 – for the first time in history – a nation proclaimed the *pursuit of happiness* as its prime value. Soon, Toqueville observed of American preachers, “...it is often difficult to be sure when listening to them whether the main object of religion is to procure eternal felicity in the next world or prosperity in this.”^{xvii}

Eventually, religion and business merged as they did nowhere else. Without the support of a state religion or centralized Catholicism, and with Protestant churches constantly splitting in schisms, each individual preacher was forced to become an entrepreneur of souls, a salesman, in order to distinguish his church from other churches and increase its membership. Consequently, a business-growth mentality grew within American Protestantism, and its philosophy of optimistic self-improvement merged with the capitalist ideology of greed and perpetual growth. The shadow of this narcissistic, blind optimism is the wounded innocence of the missionary who simply cannot understand why the natives don't appreciate his benign efforts. To him it is obvious, as George W. Bush said in 2002: "American values are right and true for every person in every society."

Freedom became a holy term that meant all things to all people. *Liberty* (from a Roman epithet for Dionysus, *Liber*) implies release – the return of the repressed – and *liberation*, in both its Marxist and Buddhist meanings. Americans struggled for a while with the difference between *positive liberty* (the power and resources to act to fulfill one's own potential), and *negative liberty* (freedom from restraint, what one *didn't have to do*). Eventually, the two forms of liberty birthed a monster: freedom became *entitlement* to do what one wants, regardless of the needs of the community, the power to achieve it and the privilege to *take liberties* with others ("to liberate" is military slang for looting). This interpretation of the pursuit of happiness led eventually to the liberties extended to *non-human* entities – corporations.

The Enlightenment and the commercial revolution offered freedom without responsibility, but it had unexpected results, writes Historian John Hope Franklin. The passionate pursuit of liberty by some resulted in the "destruction of the rights of others to pursue the same ends...the freedom to destroy freedom."^{xviii}

The Puritan's obsession with personal salvation met the opportunist's rejection of social class. Cheap western land served as a safety valve for the discontented, so abject poverty (among whites) was, for a while, relatively uncommon. To an extent unimaginable in Europe, Americans became landowners, and land meant freedom. Historian Richard Hofstadter points out that farming in America took on a "...commercially minded and speculative style. The farmer was constantly tempted to engross more land...hold it speculatively... to mine and deplete the soil, then to sell out and move."^{xix}

But when extremes of wealth and poverty did appear, the rich felt little obligation. Belief in predestination survived long after formal Puritanism declined. The myth taught that poverty was one's own fault, *not* that of the economy. The object then as now was to "get ahead," to constantly improve one's economic status relative to one's neighbors or family. Each man was free to make something of himself or to fail. Either way, he was a "self-made man," a phrase coined in 1832. By

the early nineteenth century, the first “self-help” manuals appeared, often written by clergymen, extolling the Protestant virtues of hard work and perseverance necessary for success.

But if individuals were blank slates, *the nation* had a purpose unique in history: God had chosen it to spread freedom and opportunity. Eventually, America extrapolated this idea onto world affairs. The nation of individualists became an individual among nations, bringing the good news to others, generally without asking their permission. Although empires always fabricate ideologies to rationalize conquest, only Americans justify invasion, enslavement and genocide with stories of idealism, good intentions and “manifest destiny.” A minister encouraged his flock: “There are 3,000 miles of wilderness behind these Indians...*We must free our land of strangers*, even if each mile is a marsh of blood.” The Bush II administration eventually carried this magical notion to its extreme, but it has been the bedrock foundation of our foreign policy – or at least of our *beliefs* about it – since Day One.

The myth equated mobility with progress. History itself was heliotropic, moving constantly westward. Men easily forgot its lessons, because they continually existed in a “new” America. *America The Beautiful* (1895) sings:

*O beautiful for Pilgrim feet
Whose stern impassioned stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat
Across the wilderness!*

Always moving towards something better, they looked condescendingly upon those who stayed home. For the upwardly mobile, to *be* is to be *stuck*. Tocqueville observed,

A man builds a house in which to spend his old age, and he sells it before the roof is on... he soon afterwards leaves to carry his changeable longings elsewhere... he will travel fifteen hundred miles to shake off his happiness.^{xx}

Mobility (symbolized eventually by the automobile) expresses an enduring aspect of the myth of innocence: *starting over*. One could always pull up stakes, move on, try something new or join a different church. One needed to constantly expand and grow geographically, economically, socially and spiritually. This led to wildly divergent yet philosophically similar ideals, from infinitely expanding consumer economies to “New Age” spirituality. But always it means movement: in 2005, only six percent of the million inhabitants of Las Vegas, the ultimate place of the New Start, had been born there.

“New Start” implies a familiar archetype. Tribal initiation takes boys out of their community before returning them with their sense of purpose revitalized. It is *points in time rooted within space* (the ancestral land). America inverted this ancient relationship – a person could simply leave home to acquire a new identity. Our toxic mimic of initiation became *points in space rooted in time*. As early as 1600 America symbolized the New Start for all of Europe, humanity reborn into innocence. And this version of the myth remains nearly as strong today.

Americans characteristically emphasize individual rights over the needs of the community (although we periodically suffer the eruption of the shadow – moral crusades and inquisitions). Sociologist Robert Bellah writes, “...radical individualism is what I call the default mode of American culture. It is where we go when things are relatively stable...But (this) individualist tradition finds the very idea of the common good incomprehensible.”^{xxi}

Opportunists demonize government regulation, while Puritans emphasize individual spiritual (and financial) responsibility. Obsession with self-improvement and personal achievement keeps them both ignorant of the suffering around them. *Wealth* remains proof of grace – and poverty indicates the opposite – even if the religious terminology has fallen away.

But there is a price, because individualism, entitlement and mobility facilitate a mask of innocence; and *innocence always evokes its opposite*. Historian Greil Marcus writes,

To be an American is to feel the promise as a birthright, and to feel alone and haunted when the promise fails. No failure in America, whether of love or money, is ever simple; it is always a kind of betrayal.^{xxii}

Americans, like no people before them, strive for self-improvement. But within the word “improve” lies the anxiety of those who can never *know* if they’ve attained the otherworldly goal. Thus we must continually “prove” our status in this one.

American Dualities

All societies must mediate the perennial conflict between individual and community. In America the unsteady truce between Puritan obsessions and opportunistic mania led to a division in the national psyche (the *hero* versus the *victim*) and a bewildering series of dualities that only temporarily resolve this tension.

Our basic struggle over the opposing values of *freedom* and *equality*, or individualism versus conformism, implies different views of human nature. To Puritans, since we are all innately sinful and human nature is immutable, society exists only to keep us under control. Descendents of

the opportunists, from robber barons to libertarians, care little for theology. To them, less government is simply better. Giving people things they haven't earned (unless they've inherited their wealth) creates dependency and robs them of their freedom. Conservatives rarely acknowledge how deeply rooted in theology such arguments are. Progressives, on the other hand, argue that we aren't innately sinful, and that government can help people change.

The pendulum has swung back and forth. After religious repression relaxed, freedom "rang." Narrow interpretations of equality (excluding blacks, Indians and women) prevailed from the Revolution through the mid-nineteenth century. Then came the Gilded Age, unrestrained capitalism and conspicuous consumption. In the 1930s the emphasis shifted toward equality. The decline of liberalism in the 1970s shifted the pendulum back to a superficial focus on freedom. Many still favor legislating morality – while asserting local rights over federal authority.

Wherever one of these values predominates, its shadow is nearby. Conflict emerges as tension between libertarianism and wartime conformism, or between opportunity and meritocracy – and the old-boy networks that actually ensure WASP dominance of our institutions. George W. Bush, the ultimate Yale "legacy," opposed affirmative action. Yet he never would have been admitted to Yale based on his own academic performance. Since all start on a "level playing field" with equal access to education and jobs, the myth implies, "May the best man win." The legal system is based on this notion: if (a very big if) each side retains adequate counsel, then truth and justice will naturally emerge.

Conflicts also emerge as *fairness vs. cheating*. Fairness implies that all who play by the rules will prosper. Cheating, however, reveals capitalism's core values and the realities of privilege. We love our fictional villains precisely because they will do anything to win. Even in losing, they briefly unveil the shadow of our heroic ideals: competition actually trumps fairness.

Why are so many outraged at drug use in sports? Our moral indignation expresses our innocent longing for ritual fields of play where the pursuit of money doesn't overcome the purity of fairness. Eldridge Cleaver, however, saw that when all secretly subscribe to the notion of "every man for himself:"

...the weak are seen as the natural and just prey of the strong. But since this dark principle violates our democratic ideals... we force it underground...spectator sports are geared to disguise, while affording expression to, the acting out in elaborate pageantry of the myth of the fittest in the process of surviving.^{xxiii}

More than fair, countless Western heroes offer the first blow to the villains. Since striking first would violate the rules, we must create the illusion that the Other (Indians, Mexicans, Spaniards, Germans, Japanese, Russians, Vietnamese, Nicaraguans, Iraqis, Al Queda, Taliban,

Iranians, North Koreans) has struck, or *might* strike first. Here, ideals of fairness disguise both the predatory impulse and the paranoid imagination that it manipulates.

Ours is a political myth not because it is untrue, but because its pervasiveness and its unexamined assumptions produce a consensus reality. It is a container of multiple and inconsistent meanings; its very ambiguity gives it the mythic energy that motivates us.

It allows the privileged and those who control the media to manipulate the two polar ideals. Segregation (“separate but equal”) was legal for sixty years. Reactionaries invoke equality by claiming that legal equality is sufficient and calling affirmative action “reverse discrimination” and ethnic liberals “reverse racists.” Some even argue that since prejudice no longer exists, minorities should require no assistance (which only encourages the sin of laziness). This false argument has potency because it contains some truth; since individuals have occasionally “pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps,” then conservatives claim that *everyone* should. If they can’t, says the myth, Puritan at its core, then failure is their own fault. To attack economic redistribution, however, conservatives invoke the other pole of individualism. “Freedom” becomes the right to accumulate and invest wealth without government regulation. Banking on a long tradition of anti-intellectualism, they have (since 1980) convinced millions that progressive candidates are elitist and corporate apologists are populists.

Marketing exploits both sides. Toqueville noticed tendencies toward conformity that resulted from an ideology of equality in a materialistic society. Now, we purchase millions of identical sunglasses, cigarettes, leather jackets and motorcycles because they symbolize *rebellion against conformity*. Fashion is a simultaneous declaration of freedom and membership: we present a unique self to the world while deliberately copying selected others. We “individualists” look and think, for the most part, within narrow parameters.

Military recruiters exploit romantic images of individual warriors while simultaneously emphasizing the satisfactions of forgetting oneself. They seduce young men with images of knights in heroic, *solo* combat, conquering dragons in video game conditions to entrain them in the automatic responses of the large, anonymous military *group*.

Each of the opposing values contains the seed of its shadow, especially in lifestyle choices. Moralists display stunningly imaginative voyeurism in their crusades, while sensualists reveal adolescent exhibitionism behind their rebellious gestures. Images of completely irresponsible behavior mirror unrealistic calls for abstinence.

Meanwhile, conservatives who criticize government intervention in private life demonize abortion providers, support agricultural subsidies and jail millions of non-violent pot smokers. Congressman Newt Gingrich, for example, crusaded for smaller government in the 1990s, yet

quietly secured enough federal money for his home district to make it third in the nation in subsidies per capita. George W. Bush, in his second inaugural address, used “freedom,” “free,” and “liberty” forty-nine times – while establishing a terrorist alert list that came to include over a million Americans.

Eventually, Puritans and Opportunists merged, perceiving freedom in autonomy and material possessions rather than in social relatedness or introspection. The grand product of this mix was the American: enthusiastic, confident, practical, optimistic, classless, casual, cheerful and competitive yet helpful. But to those who endured his excesses, he was arrogant, judgmental, prejudiced, narcissistic, unreflective and contemptuous of the past. He preferred character to intellect and almost universally assumed, wrote Hofstadter, that “the two somehow stand in opposition to each other.”^{xxiv} And he was *belligerent*, a childlike giant, the “Ugly American,” making fine distinctions between the elect and the damned, or crushing the weak with astonishing cruelty. D.H. Lawrence called the American soul, “. . .hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer.”

Generally, a unique if superficial balance has ruled. We love to tell ourselves that America is the land of freedom *and* equality. To Needleman, this ideal touched the hearts of people everywhere “who yearned not only for wealth . . . or comfort, but also for meaning and transcendence.” He sees in the idea of *rights* the Jeffersonian notion that all people have the intrinsic “capacity to intuit the good . . .”^{xxv}

However, we have a Bill of Rights but no Bill of Responsibilities (indeed, since government has shown that it can arbitrarily remove our rights, as it did with the Japanese-Americans during World War Two, or with the Espionage Act of 1917, which criminalized free speech, then it can be argued that all we really have are certain *privileges*). Since America, like any adolescent, emphasizes rights over responsibilities, freedom often outweighs equality. Radical thinkers, however, highlight the difference between what the nation is and its potential. The source of the paradox of freedom and equality lies in our unexamined definitions of who is and who is not a member of the *polis*. When only a small percentage of the population is admitted to that rarified atmosphere and Others are arbitrarily excluded, then both the contradiction in the rhetoric and the sense of denial and innocence are heightened. As Malcolm X said, “Sitting at the table doesn’t make you a diner, unless you eat some of what’s on that plate . . . Being born here in America doesn’t make you an American.”^{xxvi}

How much is our freedom worth? When dealing with *political* (as opposed to financial) freedom, we’re on unsteady ground. Despite the narrative of liberty, we regularly trade freedom for a dubious sense of security. Franklin had contempt for this attitude, writing, “Those who would give up Essential Liberty to purchase a little Temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.”

The paranoid imagination often outranks the predatory imagination. During wartime or periods of inquisition we quickly forget the civil liberties the nation was founded upon. Terrorized by fear of the Other, we condone gross persecutions of dissenters. This is Tocqueville's tyranny of the majority. For all their emphasis on individual rights, Americans had put so much emphasis on equality rather than upon *diversity* that they became intolerant of the freedom to be different. He wrote, "I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America."^{xxvii}

Periods of capitalist fervor have provoked responses such as the New Deal. Franklin Roosevelt reframed freedom: of speech, of religion, from want and from fear. But after FDR's death, Harry Truman replaced the last two with freedom of *enterprise*.

More fundamental to American myth than freedom or equality, *getting ahead*, or the *unrestrained quest for wealth* trumps them both. And yet, it's all relative: under Eisenhower, the rich paid extremely high income taxes. After decades of corporate welfare, both big business and big agriculture would be horrified at a *truly* free market.

The 1950s saw demands for both freedom and equality, or freedom defined as inclusion. Civil Rights activists argued that freedom is only a precondition for equality. The pendulum continues to swing. Media pundits often claim that we have it all: freedom of expression, equal pursuit of happiness and the admiration of all nations. The myth is durable, and Americans respond to myths, not facts.

Consider another duality: we could describe left-wing activism as a rational response to economic, racial or gender-based victimization. *Right*-wing extremism, however, is often a response by the relatively privileged (and *every* white male, regardless of his wealth, has privilege) to the *perception* of being victimized by women or minorities. Demonizing of scapegoats distracts millions from understanding the real sources of their troubles. This is true everywhere. But our conditions are unique, because we confuse class with race, as I will show. Similarly, American foreign policy attempts to convert legitimate anger into irrational violence. After Viet Nam, the U.S. deliberately eliminated secular activists throughout the Mid-East, thus forcing most dissent into religious extremism, which is inherently conservative and easily manipulated.

The Wilderness and the Savior

Like the Biblical story, American history moved through wilderness. The Puritans considered this a necessary stage, a test of their faith, and saw only two choices: either heroically penetrate and

overcome it, or become its captive. It was the abode of savages (Latin: *silva*, forest), in "...a waste and howling wilderness where none inhabited but hellish fiends, and brutish men that devils worshipped."

By 1800 a more nuanced vision of the wilderness emerged. Nature could be a source of strength and virtue if one took a Romantic viewpoint. Emerson wrote, "...within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign."^{xxviii}

Legions of opportunists, however, were relentlessly imposing order upon the wilderness. The American soul was split; now there were two "Wests" as well, wrote Henry Nash Smith. For those who pushed beyond the frontier – and those who vicariously followed their exploits – the *agricultural* West was a tedious place. But the *Wild West* was "... an exhilarating region of adventure and comradeship in the open air. Its heroes... were... noble anarchists owing no master..."^{xxix}

The appeal of these adventurers lay in the fact that they had embarked on the hero's journey. That they often failed mattered little because they carried the aspirations of millions. The heroes of the western expansion became the stock characters of American myth. The greatest of them, Daniel Boone, continually moved as civilization encroached, allegedly complaining, "I had not been two years at the licks before a d—d Yankee came, and settled down *within an hundred miles of me!*"

Whether Boone actually said that is irrelevant. Americans *needed* him to, because the developing myth divided the Apollonian City from the Dionysian Wilderness. The advancing line of the Frontier created a safety valve of free western land when urban conditions became unmanageable. Like the Hebrew narrative, it linked military triumph with civilization's progress and with the moral character of its heroes, who distinguished themselves by saving white women from the Indians. Biographers turned Boone into the "Achilles of the West."

Portraying history as a metaphoric, extended Indian war, their narratives insisted on the racial basis of difference. Progress could occur only by subjugating nature and exterminating the savages. Native myths had arisen from the ground out of vast antiquity. The new stories, however, were fashioned by a fledgling and characteristically American *public relations industry*. Thousands of "dime novels" depicted the west as a source of regeneration, even as actual wilderness was disappearing and transforming into a *myth* of wilderness. The cowboy (and urban detective) heroes of these novels violently resolved all challenges. This literature, writes Smith, was "an objectified mass dream." When competition among publishers arose, writers merely had to kill a few more Indians to keep readers interested, "exaggerating violence and bloodshed... to the point of... overt sadism."^{xxx}

After Boone, “Buffalo Bill” Cody was America’s greatest hero. Writers so exaggerated his deeds (while he was still alive) that one couldn’t tell where the actual left off and where fiction began. Into the 1920s one publisher kept 200 titles about him in print. For years Cody took his band of cowboys and Indians on tour, further impressing the myth of the Frontier on countless Americans, including a young Joseph Campbell.

The other, less exciting West partook of the official cult of progress. Hunters blazed trails and defeated beasts and Indians, and *farmers* – the vast majority – followed, establishing new communities. A new mythic promise of America developed, expressing fecundity, growth and the happy labor of idealized, Jeffersonian farmers: the “garden of the world.”

Although this story is no more accurate than that of the cowboy, it survives because it embodies fantasies of simpler, happier times and independent ownership of land. Such ownership (for whites) was possible, of course, only if the frontier continued to expand into Indian Territory. These “sturdy” family farmers, backbone of the country in war and peace, were the spirit of democracy. Neither rich nor poor, they owed no one and exploited no one. They gave to the myth of the garden another fundamental characteristic: the West (the Midwest, the *heartland*) was racially homogeneous and classless. This powerful and historically unique narrative attracted millions of immigrants in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Americans were free *and* equal.

Another agrarian myth was the romantic and harmonious southern plantation, whose benign patriarch cared only to protect his charming heroines and happy slaves. Although the image of the garden ultimately prevailed, the romance of the South lingered for generations. After the Civil War, it was transformed into the “Lost Cause,” a civic religion of white superiority that lamented the destruction of the graceful southern lifestyle by blacks and Yankee carpetbaggers. Many northerners, eager to forget Reconstruction, embraced the myth as well. The nation told itself a new story, how brothers had healed their differences and become united.

Despite the massive crime of slavery, these stories rarely acknowledged anything but purity and good within the utopian garden. Outside, however, was darkness – and dark people. The Frontier myth, or the *American Monomyth*, was repeated endlessly: a small, harmonious, innocent community, often symbolized by a young woman, is threatened. The chosen people find themselves under *unprovoked, racial* attack. Democratic institutions are impotent against the absolute evil symbolized by the Other.

Western tales offered the original American superhero, a mysterious outsider who intervened, redeemed captives, destroyed evildoers, cleansed the wilderness and violently regenerated the community. This figure combined Jesus, willing to sacrifice himself for us, and Jehovah, furiously condemning the unrighteous. He knew the Indians better than normal white

people. And, like Dionysus, he straddled the boundaries between civilization and savagery, arriving out of nowhere and disappearing when his work was finished. Eden, innocent yet powerless, had no choice but to rely on this lone hero.

In two centuries of popular literature, the enigmatic stranger, in literally thousands of incarnations, intervened at the last moment to save the day. *Redemption through violence – righteous, merciless confrontation with the Other* – became America’s fundamental narrative. Invested with the power and unexamined depth of myth, the lone, uncompromisingly violent crusader inhabits the very center of the American character. All he needs to act is provocation by evil and a woman to save.

The Red Other

Patriarchy’s original Others were women (“not male”) and nature (“not culture.”) These prejudices were models for the demonizing of “primitive” people shared by all Europeans. What made America unique, however, was the combination of Puritan and opportunist philosophies. No other nation has gone to such lengths, for so long, to define itself by *excluding* so many from full membership, while simultaneously telling itself pervasive stories of freedom and opportunity.

To the settlers, the ecological and communal values of the natives were proof of their sub-human condition. Since Indians didn’t utilize their resources, reasoned whites, their lands were empty, and whites should have them. Indeed, Adolph Hitler would write: “Neither Spain nor Britain should be models of German expansionism, but the Nordics of North America, who...ruthlessly pushed aside an inferior race...”^{xxxix}

The myth of the Frontier defined Indians as bloodthirsty killers who swept out of the dark forests. The relationship of white to red is so shrouded in legend that modern people cannot grasp the extent to which whites feared and utterly loathed the original “reds.” Herman Melville wrote that by 1840 Indian hating had become a “metaphysic.” It was a unique dimension in which religious zeal, barbaric atrocity and sacrificial ritual merged to create genocide. In 1636, while founding Harvard College, Puritans massacred and burned 500-700 Pequots:

...It was a fearfull sight to see them thus frying in the fryer, and the streams of blood ... horrible was the stincke and sente there of, but the victory seemed a sweete sacrifice, and they gave the prays thereof to God, who had wrought so wonderfully for them...

Hatred – *and joy* – of this intensity expresses a “metaphysic” that begins in abstraction and alienation from the body and drapes itself in innocence. Ritual sacrifice – fire and blood – gives its practitioners a consistent moral self-image. It enabled the My Lai massacre and dozens like it in Viet Nam. It lies behind the communal celebration of whiteness known as the lynch mob, and it enables us to casually dismiss the torture of *suspected* terrorists. But it does not completely insulate us from guilt. For that to occur, one more step is required: the erasure of memory. After the Pequot massacre, the Puritans passed a law making it a crime to utter the word Pequot.

The myth of innocence is so attractive because it inverts guilt. The *settlers* became the virgins – captured, tormented and raped by savages. In 1682 the first of thousands of “captivity narratives” was published. For the next half-century, *all but one of America’s best-selling books* were captivity tales. These highly popular and symbolically potent stories constituted our first coherent myth-literature, and they haunted Americans for ten generations, long enough to lodge permanently in our psyche.

Innocence required that “whiteness” be clearly distinguished. So captivity narratives imagined capture by the Other as the destruction of all that was good, and rape (*pollution* by the Other’s bodily fluids) as a fate worse than death. This threat enforced conformism by graphically depicting the horrors experienced by those who ventured outside the gates. Americans both feared and fantasized about “alien abductions,” as their descendents would three centuries later.

The narrative of regeneration through violence was a toxic mimic of initiation that superficially resembled ancient hero myths. Both the hunter (willingly) and the captive (unwillingly) entered a primal world. By maintaining their racial/cultural integrity and defeating its denizens, they might seize its power, return to civilization and morally renew their community.

In truth, however, large numbers of captives, including over sixty percent of young women captives, preferred native life and *refused to return*. Preachers warned, “...people are ready to run wild into the woods again...to be as Heathenish as ever...” Even Franklin admitted, “No European who has tasted Savage Life can afterwards bear to live in our societies.” While whites considered idleness sinful, the natives appeared happy without laboring constantly. They had few sexual taboos, relative gender equality and great affection for their children, whereas whites were known to execute children for simple transgressions. One white woman who chose life with her captors testified, “Here I have no master...”

Since native lifestyles were so appealing, it was doubly necessary to demonize them. Whites often treated ex-captives as pariahs who’d been “polluted” by intimacy with the Other. Periodicals regularly featured the theme of rape by Indian captors, despite little evidence. In fact, ubiquitous images in art of bound and near-naked virgins begging mercy from hulking red brutes revealed

seductive fantasies of relations with the Other. But if Puritans were sexually restrained, European culture was not. Both rape and prostitution were common Biblical themes. *White* men had been raping, beating, mutilating and whoring their women since the Bronze Age.

The wilderness and its inhabitants inevitably reminded the Puritan of his essential oneness with his body. Therefore culture set out to destroy nature to erase the pain of remembering what it had lost.

Hundreds of (mostly fictional) captivity tales accompanied the migration west, expressing our assumptions of how civilization progresses. They served as recruiting tools for the revolutionary army. Later writers used them to re-tell stories of male incompetence as counter-narratives with female victims. Barbary pirates captured American sailors in the early 1800s, but the stories were printed as accounts of fictional *woman* captives. “The myth,” writes Susan Faludi, “was now in final form...ready to be reactivated whenever a homeland threat might call for its protective services.”^{xxxii}

With the basic theme firmly implanted in the American psyche, politicians easily substituted villains, manipulating fear of abduction by blacks during Reconstruction and the “white slavery” panic of 1909. In the 1970s, Patricia Hearst’s kidnapping by black radicals contributed to the conservative backlash, while Richard Nixon reframed American prisoners of war as “innocent” captives. The Iran hostage crisis helped elect Ronald Reagan. Propaganda prior to the invasions of Panama and Grenada and the Gulf War utilized lurid and entirely bogus captivity stories.

The paranoid imagination continues to run wild. The 1990s saw hysteria over child abuse, predatory daycare teachers, alien abductions and satanic cults. In 1994, after a (blond) girl was actually kidnapped and murdered, California enacted the “Three Strikes” law, and thousands went to prison for life.

In 2003, Americans thrilled when Jessica Lynch was captured in Iraq and then “liberated.” It hardly mattered that she was part of an invading army, nor that the Iraqis had been taking good care of her, nor that her own shadow-figure, Lyndie England, would soon become a scapegoat for the Abu Ghraib torture scenes. Indeed, the U.S. Army delayed Lynch’s “rescue” until the cameramen arrived.

Hostage crises provide pretexts for intervention. In this “protection racket,” writes Faludi, no wonder “fetuses in antiabortion literature are most often depicted as little girls.”^{xxxiii}

This potent theme remains basic to romance novels, science fiction (including *Star Wars*), superhero tales from *Superman* to *Rambo*, and, of course, westerns. The classic version is John Ford’s *The Searchers* of 1956, which has been described as “the most flattered movie of all time.” Jaime Weinman writes, “The very idea of a distraught relative going into an alien world to bring out

of it another relative or a friend – those movies have proliferated in the last 25 years, and all of them can be traced back to *The Searchers* in one form or another.^{xxxiv} But the theme itself was already 270 years old when Ford made *The Searchers*.

The City on a Hill, like the Thebes of Pentheus, was by definition utterly innocent. If it couldn't admit any imperfections, then evil was outside, and therefore Indians deserved their fate. When increasing population pushed the settlers beyond Eden's boundaries, they had *liberty* to cut the natives down like trees. By 1717, all the New England colonial governments (and by 1758 almost all northern colonies) were paying lucrative bounties for bloody Indian scalps, regardless of whether the victims were friend or foe. This led to the first use of the term "redskin." Indeed, some scholars argue that the British brought the large-scale practice of scalping to the Indians, not the reverse.^{xxxv}

There were fundamental differences between the violence perpetrated by the Spanish and the British. In the south, genocide was a by-product of enslavement and harvesting of mineral riches. The British, however, engaged in long-term development because the north lacked gold. For them, Indians were simply in the way. But their system produced the same results, and both were justified by holy texts. Rapid collapse of indigenous populations reminded whites of Biblical narratives, proving that it was all divinely ordained.

Thus it was a simple step for intellectuals to support the myth of innocence by identifying America's self-interest with God's plan. Franklin: "If it be the design of Providence to extirpate these savages...to make room for the cultivators of the earth... rum may be the appointed means." Jefferson: Whites should "pursue them to extermination." Horace Greeley: "These people must die out...vain to struggle against (God's) righteous decree." *Historian* Francis Parkman: The natives' "own ferocity and intractable indolence" caused their demise. Parkman didn't notice or care that he'd confused two opposite traits, because both aggression and laziness were sins in the eyes of the Puritan, and "othering" does not have to be logical, even for academics.

Eventually the Indian's image alternated between an ecological symbol of humanity's childhood and the cruel violator of the pastoral peace, both the victim (of the hunter) and the violator (of the captive).

America's growth required the near-total extermination of an entire civilization and a myth of innocence to cover up the guilt. Shortly after the final massacre at Wounded Knee, Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed, "... this great continent could not have been kept as a game preserve for squalid savages."

The Black Other

Genocide created two problems: it didn't leave enough survivors to be identified as Other, and it didn't leave enough laborers. Whites required someone to act both roles. So they uprooted millions of Africans to form the foundation of the Southern economy.

In the European mind, blackness had long lacked the virtues associated with whiteness. In 1488 it was nothing unusual for Pope Innocent (!) VIII to give black slaves as presents to his cardinals. Africans first arrived in Cuba in 1510, after the Spanish had decimated the aboriginal population, and in Jamestown in 1619.

But neither "blackness" nor "whiteness" firmly established themselves in the American mind until the defeat of Bacon's Rebellion of 1676, when indentured servants of both races challenged the landowners. This was a watershed moment. Historian Theodore Allen writes: "...laboring-class African-Americans and European-Americans fought side by side for the abolition of slavery...If the plan had succeeded, the history of...America might have taken a much different path."^{xxxvi}

Previously, there had been little distinction between dark- and light-skinned laborers. Afterwards, Virginia codified its bondage system. In the first example of "affirmative action," it replaced the terms "Christian" or "free" with "*white*," gave new privileges to Caucasians, removed rights from free blacks and banned interracial marriage. Other laws contributed to what Allen calls the "absolutely unique American form of male supremacism" – the right of *any* Euro-American to rape any African-American without fear of reprisal.^{xxxvii}

This new allegiance to whiteness eliminated class competition and provided a sub-class of poor whites to intimidate slaves and suppress rebellion. Copied everywhere, the pattern merged with the myth of racial war: America's primary model for class distinction (and class conflict) became *relations between white planters and black slaves, rather than between rich and poor*. The new system, writes Allen, insisted on "the social distinction between the *poorest* member of the oppressor group and any member, however propertied, of the oppressed group."^{xxxviii} Eventually, southern class discrimination merged with northern religious stereotyping. Since poverty equaled sinfulness (to the Puritan) and black equaled poor (to the Opportunist), then it became obvious that blackness equaled sin.

Regardless of their economic status, whites pledged allegiance to a state that was defined by the perpetual threat of the return of the repressed. The predatory imagination found the secret to perpetuating itself – as it would in the 1870s, 1890s, 1930s, 1950s, 1980s and today – by manipulating the paranoid imagination.

It was exquisite timing: southerners encoded their brutal system just as northerners breathlessly read of both Salem and the first captivity narratives. *Red, White and Black were born together in the American soul*. All the darker elements of the myth of innocence were in place: race, sex, victimization, repressive religion and witch hunting. Psychologically speaking, this was America's "birth trauma" – the events that formed our essential character, our fatal flaw.

On the national level, racist fear mongering appeared at least as early as 1844, when Democrats attempted to arouse laborers against abolitionists, threatening that free blacks would take their jobs. "Nativist" movements attained considerable electoral power by turning Protestant fear of the Other upon more recent Catholic immigrants.

Over three centuries after Bacon's Rebellion, scholars still wonder why a strong socialist movement never developed in America, as it did almost everywhere else. Characteristically, they rarely consider the overwhelming presence of the Other: *no other nation* combined irresistible myths of opportunity with rigid legal systems deliberately intended to divide natural allies. Whiteness implies both purity (which demands removal of *impurities*) and privilege. No matter how impoverished a white, male American feels, he hears hundreds of subtle messages every day that divide him from the impure. Without racial privilege the concept of whiteness is meaningless. Often, Americans have had nothing to call their own except white privilege, yet they cling to it and support those whose coded rhetoric promises to maintain it.

The process of exclusion and subordination required a massive lie about black inferiority that has been enshrined in our national narrative. "After all," writes activist Tim Wise, "to accept that all men and women were truly equal, while still mightily oppressing large segments of that same national population on the basis of skin color, would be to lay bare the falsity of the American creed."^{xxxix} Similarly, the French philosopher Montesquieu wrote, "It is impossible for us to suppose these creatures to be men, because, allowing them to be men, a suspicion would follow that we ourselves are not Christian."

The sheer quantities of this second American genocide stagger the imagination. We literally can't believe it – and this is a powerful marker of our innocence. *Africa lost fifty million persons*.^{xl} Indeed, more Africans than Europeans came to the Americas between 1500 and 1800. It is critical to understand that slavery and its effects were not secondary consequences, mere exceptions to the grand themes of liberty and democracy, writes Historian George Fredrickson. They "constitute its central theme...its original sin."^{xli}

America in the 21st century simply wouldn't be America – economically, politically, psychologically or socially – without slavery and its legacy. Prior to 1860 most presidents and Supreme Court justices were Southern slaveholders. Except for precious metals, Africans produced

almost all major American exports to Europe. Slave-grown cotton accounted for seventy percent of the raw material fueling *Britain's* industrial revolution. Slaves were America's most valuable assets after the land itself. All areas of the country, especially the northern cities, profited. But what about arguments that America grew because of the "free market?" Noam Chomsky counters them in one sentence. "Genocide and slavery: try to imagine a more severe market distortion than that."^{xlii}

It is critical to understand that in certain fundamental respects this situation has remained essentially unchanged. Between 1900 and 1970, Southern Senators held a deadlock on Congress due to their disenfranchisement of blacks. Southern whites had nearly double the representation in Congress than they could have earned by their own population. Since then, the "solid South" has simply changed its allegiance from Democrat to Republican, with enough votes to wreck or water down any progressive legislation. In the age of Obama, race continues to be the unacknowledged subtext of our politics.

Consider the intersection of myths centering on Southern plantations: the myth of free markets; the myth of the pastoral plantation, with everyone happily playing their role, protected by benevolent masters and Protestant ministers; the myth of pure Southern Womanhood; and the complex images of the slaves themselves. Indeed, the North long held to yet another myth, that discrimination occurred only in the South. In reality, *Northern* mobs attacked abolitionists on over two hundred occasions.

Joel Kovel asserts that there are two kinds of racism. One is the obvious *dominative* racism that developed in close contact (including the privilege of rape) between master and slave. The second – *aversive* racism – arose from Puritan associations of blackness with filth. Tocqueville noticed that prejudice "appears to be stronger in the states that have abolished slavery than in those where it still exists; and nowhere is it so intolerant as in those states where servitude has never been known."^{xliii}

Indeed, New England had about 13,000 slaves in 1750. In 1720, New York City's population of seven thousand included 1,600 blacks, most of them slaves. Not until 1664 (22 years after Massachusetts) did Maryland declare that all blacks held in the colony and all those imported in the future would serve for life, as would their offspring. And the two colonies with the strongest religious foundations – Massachusetts and Pennsylvania – were the ones that first outlawed "miscegenation."

When northern states expanded the voting franchise for whites in the 1830s, they explicitly abolished it for blacks. Andrew Jackson is the major figure in this context, the key figure of the first half of the nineteenth century. "Jacksonian Democracy" increased participation for *white men*, while simultaneously denying it to and then removing thousands of Indians. With the broadening of

the franchise for whites, the sense of “us” grew, but the sense of “not-us” also grew. Jackson ensured that race would trump culture as the primary determinant of citizenship.

Later, several states including Indiana and Illinois literally banned all blacks from entering. Oregon (1859), however, was the only free state *admitted to the Union with an exclusion clause in its constitution*. The ban remained in place until it was finally repealed in 1927. Well into the 1950s (as any black entertainer or athlete can attest), thousands of “sundown towns” in thirty states prevented blacks from residing overnight.

As whiteness took on increasing significance, so did the fear of “mongrelization.” Below the fear, however, was *envy* and the desire to achieve authentic psychological integration. To cover up such unacceptable fantasies, whites projected their desires onto blacks. Even the great humanist Jefferson apparently felt that black men had a preference for white women over black women “as uniformly...as the preference of the Oran-utan for the black woman over those of his own species.”

As the Native American population east of the Appalachian Mountains shrunk into relative insignificance, African-Americans assumed the role of the Other. What (in the white mind) were their characteristics? First, they were childish, lazy and unreliable – the shadow of the Protestant Ethic. It was necessary to *force* them to be productive.

White performers began to wear blackface in the 1840s. LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) writes,

“... the only consistent way of justifying what had been done to him – now that he had reached what can be called a post-bestial stage – was to demonstrate the ridiculousness of his inability to act as a “normal” human being.”^{xliv}

Whites *needed* to believe that blacks were slow, dumb and happy, so blacks *acted* that way. Whites created fictional characters – from Jim Crow to *Gone With the Wind*’s Mammy: loveable and loyal, yet lacking any concern for intellect or freedom. Blackface minstrelsy was America’s primary form of entertainment throughout the nineteenth century. Forms of it (*Amos ‘n Andy*) survived into the 1950s, tutoring millions in racist stereotyping. But it provided something else: impersonating blacks, whites could briefly inhabit their own bodies.

A second aspect contradicted the first, but no one cared. This Other was intensely sexual and aggressive. Like Dionysus, he might sneak in and corrupt the children. Class society assigns the mind to the masters and the body to the servants. In racially homogeneous societies, where leaders racially resemble followers, these images are not mutually exclusive. The poor can potentially join the elite. But in *racial* caste systems masters are physically different from servants, and the images are mutually exclusive. The mind/body division coincides with the racial gulf, and this distinction becomes sacred.

It took abstraction to new levels. Whites hated the body's needs and feared that they might be judged by how well they controlled them. Here is a clue to slavery's appeal. This terror, writes Ventura, "...was compacted into a tension that gave Western man the need to control every body he found." In slavery, "the body could be both reviled and controlled."^{xlv}

Third, it was necessary to confine this Black Other of the South, unlike the Red Other (now primarily west of the Mississippi River), *within* the gates of Eden. Whites could savagely defend their women from him, but they couldn't exterminate or isolate him in concentration camps (otherwise known as reservations), because he was critical to economic prosperity. Slavery fit the model of an *internal* Other that had appeared earlier in the Witch craze (There was one exception. By the time of Florida's Seminole wars, black and red intermarriage had been going on for generations, and blacks joined reds as the external Other for a time).

After emancipation, racism remained the foundation of a political economy predicated upon fear, the constant threat of violence, division of the working class and further refinements of whiteness. The law long assumed that blacks were persons with *any* African ancestry. The "one-drop rule," used by no other nation, made one a black person. "Octoroons," who had *seven white great-grandparents out of eight*, were considered to be black.

Curiously, in the case of Native American admixture with whites, courts enforced the one-drop rule more selectively. The "Pocahontas exception" existed because many influential Virginia families claimed descent from Pocahontas. To avoid classifying them as non-white the Assembly declared that a person could be considered white as long as they had no more than one-sixteenth Indian blood.

After 1865, "freedom" no longer defined whiteness. So new laws prevented most blacks from acquiring western land and kept them *de facto* slaves in the south. Homesteading became a privilege of whiteness, another example of affirmative action. In the southwest, similar systems targeted Latinos. No wonder our picture of the hardy "pioneers" is lily-white.

When poor whites and blacks again threatened to unite, the Jim Crow system arose, held in place by the threat of lynching. Between 1868 and 1871, the Ku Klux Klan murdered 20,000 Americans. In the 1890s, when workers and farmers organized the Populist Movement, there were 200 lynchings per year. The dream of unity collapsed (as it would again in the 1970s) under the fear and the temptation to identify as *white*.

This systemic violence might have provoked more outrage but for a rationale that silenced criticism. Sexuality was a means of reasserting both white control over blacks and male domination of women, even though fewer than a quarter of lynchings resulted from allegations of sexual assault. When agriculture mechanized and the South no longer required them, many blacks left,

only to be confined within northern ghettos, where many black women could find work only as prostitutes. By 1900 the mythmakers had succeeded: most whites believed that blacks hadn't been ready for freedom because they couldn't "sacrifice their lusts."

Like ancient Athenians, Victorian Americans saw themselves as Apollonian, hardworking, rational and progressive. Meanwhile, the Other appeared in a form the Greeks would have recognized, but burdened with Christian sinfulness. There was no place for him or her within the pure American psyche, but it was necessary to keep them close. The descendants of the slaves, in both their stereotyped, earthy physicality and the implied threat of their vengeance became America's dark incarnation of Dionysus, our collectively repressed memory and imagination. Since whites desperately needed to project him, to *see* him, they created exactly those conditions – segregation and discrimination – that dehumanized him and fostered behavior that whites could demonize.

Violent thugs were not the only whites to perpetuate these conditions; respected intellectuals have always done their part. The "Dunning School" of racist historians dominated the writing of post-Civil War history well into the 1950s. William Dunning, founder of the American Historical Association, taught Columbia students that blacks were incapable of self-government. Yale's Ulrich Phillips defended slaveholders and claimed they did much to civilize the slaves. Henry Commager and (Harvard's) Samuel Morison's *The Growth of the American Republic*, read by generations of college freshmen, perpetuated the myth of the plantation and claimed that slaves "suffered less than any other class in the South...The majority...were apparently happy."^{xlvi} Daniel Boorstin's *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* doesn't mention slavery at all. Similarly, Arthur Schlesinger's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Age of Jackson* never mentions the Trail of Tears.

American democracy is one of the greatest achievements in world history. Yet the unique conditions of its founding led to deeper abstraction, a widened gap between mind and body, genocide and a universal culture of fear. White Americans filled their imaginary underworld with monsters: the outer, Red Other and the inner, Black Other. In 1960, novelist James Baldwin concluded,

We would never, never allow Negroes to starve, to grow bitter, and to die in ghettos all over the country if we were not driven by some nameless fear that has nothing to do with Negroes...most white people imagine that (what) they can salvage from the storm of life is really, in sum, their innocence.^{xlvii}

Notes to Chapter Seven

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- ii --*American Holocaust*, p. 146
- iii --Psalm 58: 10
- iv --*Dancing In The Streets*, p. 145
- v --Galatians 5:24
- vi --*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, p. 104
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- x --*Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*
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- xiii --*White Racism*, p. 89
- xiv --*Regeneration Through Violence*, p. 14-24
- xv --*The American Adam*, p. 5
- xvi --*The American Soul*, p. 39
- xvii --*Democracy In America*, p. 403
- xviii --*From Slavery To Freedom – A History of Negro Americans*, p. 31
- xix --*Anti-Intellectualism In American Life*, p. 272-3.
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- xxiv --*Anti-Intellectualism In American Life*, p. 208.
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- xxxiv --Jaime Weinman, "The Searchers: the most flattered movie of all time," *Maclean's*, 6/05/06.
- xxxv --*A Little Matter of Genocide*, p. 180-184

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- xxxvi --*The Invention of the White Race*, p. 214-5
- xxxvii --Ibid, p. 251
- xxxviii --Ibid, p. 243
- xxxix --*Between Barack And A Hard Place*, p. 116
- xl --*A People's History of the United States*, p. 29. Of that number, perhaps ten million were actually delivered alive to the New World, in ships that held two to three hundred persons. Do the math.
- xli --Fredrickson, George M., "America's Original Sin," *New York Review of Books*, 3/25/2004
- xlii --*Understanding Power*, p. 255-7
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- xliv --*Blues People*, p. 84
- xlv --*Shadow Dancing in the U.S.A.*, p. 146-7
- xlvi --Commager, Henry Steele and Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Growth of the American Republic* (New York, 1930), p. 415- 418
- xlvii --*Race-ing Justice, En-Gendering Power*, p. 179-80