

Nicholas Cords
Patrick Gerster

MYTH

AND THE

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

VOLUME TWO

THIRD EDITION

Myth and the American Experience

Volume Two

THIRD EDITION

Edited and with an Introduction by
Nicholas Cords and Patrick Gerster

Lakewood Community College



HarperCollins *Publishers*

Sponsoring Editor: Lauren Silverman/Bruce Borland
Project Editor: Susan Goldfarb
Art Direction: Lucy Krikorian
Text Design Adaptation and Cover Design: Graphnick
Cover Coordinator: Lucy Krikorian
Photo Research: Mira Schachne/Liza Caldwell
Production: Willie Lane/Sunaina Sehwan
Compositor: David Seham Associates
Printer and Binder: R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company
Cover Printer: Lynn Art Offset Corporation

Myth and the American Experience (Volume Two), Third Edition

Copyright © 1991 by Nicholas Cords and Patrick Gerster

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in Publication Data

Myth and the American experience / edited and with an introduction by
Nicholas Cords and Patrick Gerster.—3rd ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-06-041379-4 (v. 1). —ISBN 0-06-041380-8 (v. 2)

I. United States—History. 2. United States—Historiography.

I. Cords, Nicholas. II. Gerster, Patrick.

E178.6.M94 1991

973—dc20

90-5004

CIP

To
Maggie and Carole

Mundus vult decipi
[The world wants to be deceived.]

All America lies at the end of the wilderness road,
and our past is not a dead past, but still lives in
us. Our forefathers had civilization inside them,
the wild outside. We live in the civilization they
created, but within us the wilderness still lingers.
What they dreamed, we live, and what they lived,
we dream.

T. K. Whipple, *Study Out the Land*

Preface

The enthusiastic response to previous editions of *Myth and the American Experience* has made this new edition possible. In receiving both words of praise and suggestions for improvement from users of earlier editions, our conviction about the viability of a mythic perspective on American history has, if anything, become more firm. The mythological approach to American history continues to be both relevant and exciting. It most assuredly has come of age, or at least it has assumed its proper place alongside more traditional contemporary perspectives on the American past.

Since the publication of the first edition of *Myth and the American Experience*, we have had occasion to comment further—in classroom lectures, during the presentation of professional papers, and with the publication of articles, books, and reviews—on the elusive relationship between myth and American history. Those experiences have led us to an even deeper awareness of myth's reality. We continue to see myth and reality as complementary elements of the historical record.

The selected historical myths discussed and analyzed in this work can best be understood as a series of *false beliefs* about America's past. They are false beliefs, however, which have been accepted as true and acted upon as real. Thus, one comes to see that myths remain both true and false simultaneously. They are false in the sense that they often enjoy only a remote relationship to what most informed historians consider to have actually happened; they are true in the sense that people believe them and that they form bases for action. It is well to remember that there is a point at which myth and reality intersect; at that given point, they become one and the same. A myth becomes reality precisely when people base their beliefs upon it and act as if the myth were true. In fact, the making of myths is a twofold process by which a culture structures its world and by which it perpetuates its grandest dreams.

The idea for *Myth and the American Experience* grew out of our own teaching experiences. In continually dealing with students who for the most part were beginning their collegiate study of American history, we found that a thematic approach to the nation's past was useful, even stimulating, for those intent on understanding the past of which they were a continuing part. More specifically, the theme of "myth"—a thread by which to trace the diverse tapestry of our cultural experience—proved to be especially engaging.

In creating a third edition of *Myth and the American Experience*, we are necessarily reminded of the history of the book itself—for without its own successful history, this new edition would never have come to pass. We have sought to retain the vitality and integrity of earlier editions, while remaining sensitive to recent scholarly trends. More specifically, while offering an espe-

cially strong foundation of "classic" historical writing and interpretation, we have sought to better reflect those habitually underrepresented, both in American society and in history texts. Thus, we have included several new selections on Indians and women; new material on the Great Awakening, the Chicano experience, and the social realities of the Jacksonian era; new studies of Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Reconstruction, and the two Roosevelts; and fresh perspectives on such topics as workers, Victorian sexuality, the melting pot, Japanese Americans, John F. Kennedy, and the very nature of myth itself. We have found good reason to retain the basic organization of the previous edition and have been guided in our final selections by a desire to offer articles that voice our mythic theme in a scholarly way: articles that offer students readability and current interest without sacrificing the demands of thorough historical scholarship. Our emphasis on historiography remains, for historians continue to maintain their seemingly contradictory roles as mythmakers and, at the same time, myth-debunkers.

NICHOLAS CORDS
PATRICK GERSTER

Acknowledgments

As the historical past itself is a collaborative enterprise, so too is this book. While we claim the mythic theme applied across the entire landscape of American history to be uniquely ours, we gratefully acknowledge those whose efforts came in various ways to be reflected in the final product. Our greatest thanks must be extended to our professional colleagues; the results of their many years of scholarly effort comprise the very heart of this work. Without their intellectual skills and narrative talents, this book would not have been possible. Students have helped us both to hone our ideas and to gauge better the critical reception of individual selections. Our families have granted us both support and a sounding board for the joys and problems that cumulatively accrue to such a project. The reviewers of this edition—Carol Jensen, University of Wisconsin at La Crosse; Charles Wilson, University of Mississippi; Tom Jones, Metropolitan State University; Bruce Dierenfield, Canisius College; and Marlette Rebhorn, Austin Community College—by their constructive criticism, also have made this a better project. The publishing support system of HarperCollins was most helpful in bringing our ideas from mind to printed page. Lauren Silverman, our original sponsoring editor, in particular showed early enthusiasm and added consistent strategic support to our efforts. Bruce Borland, sponsoring editor, and Susan Goldfarb, project editor, guided the work through its editorial journey. To all of these we offer thanks.

NICHOLAS CORDS
PATRICK GERSTER

Contents

Preface **xi**

Acknowledgments **xiii**

Introduction: Myth and History **1**

I Myths of the Civil War and Reconstruction **5**

Stephen B. Oates, "*Abraham Lincoln: The Man Behind the Myths*" **9**

Eric Foner, "*The New View of Reconstruction*" **19**

Thomas C. Cochran, "*Did the Civil War Retard Industrialization?*" **29**

Richard White, "*The Winning of the West: The Expansion of the Western
Sioux*" **38**

II American Myths at Century's End **51**

David Brion Davis, "*Ten-Gallon Hero*" **56**

Richard Hofstadter, "*The Myth of the Happy Yeoman*" **69**

John G. Cawelti, "*From Rags to Respectability: Horatio Alger*" **78**

Herbert G. Gutman, "*The Workers' Search for Power*" **92**

H. Wayne Morgan, "*The Myth of the Gilded Age*" **105**

Dee Alexander Brown, "*The Ghost Dance and the Battle of Wounded
Knee*" **113**

Reynold M. Wik, "*The Gay Nineties—Reconsidered*" **121**

Carol Z. Stearns and Peter N. Stearns, "*Victorian Sexuality: Can Historians
Do It Better?*" **130**

III Myths of Progressivism and the 1920s **137**

George E. Mowry, "*The Progressive Profile*" **141**

Morton Keller, "*Theodore Roosevelt and the Mythos of the Presidency*" **156**

Arthur S. Link, "*Woodrow Wilson: A Profile*" **163**

Ernest R. May, "*American Intervention: 1917*" **170**

Estelle Freedman, "*Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and
American Feminism*" **180**

- Arthur S. Link, "What Happened to the Progressive Movement in the 1920s?" 186
- Stanley Coben, "The Failure of the Melting Pot" 201
- John William Ward, "The Meaning of Lindbergh's Flight" 221
- William Appleman Williams, "The Legend of Isolationism in the 1920s" 232

IV *Mythology of Roosevelt, the New Deal, and Beyond* 243

- John Kenneth Galbraith, "The Great Wall Street Crash" 247
- William E. Leuchtenburg, "The Lengthening Shadow of FDR: An Enduring Myth" 259
- Paul K. Conkin, "The New Deal" 276
- Roger Daniels, "Pearl Harbor and the Yellow Peril" 281
- Wayne S. Cole, "American Entry into World War II: A Historiographical Appraisal" 295
- Alonzo L. Hamby, "The Liberals, Truman, and FDR as Symbol and Myth" 309
- Athan Theoharis, "Postwar America: Distorted Realities" 316
- Stephen E. Ambrose, "The Ike Age: The Revisionist View of Eisenhower" 324
- Lance Morrow, "JFK.: How Good a President?" 336

V *Myths of Modern America* 347

- Harrison E. Salisbury, "Image and Reality in Indochina" 351
- Theodore H. White, "Watergate and the Myth of the Presidency" 361
- Carol Ruth Berkin, "Not Separate; Not Equal" 372
- Clayborne Carson, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Charismatic Leadership in a Mass Struggle" 383
- William W. Savage, Jr., "Indian Life: Transforming an American Myth" 390
- John R. Chávez, "The Chicano Image and the Myth of Aztlán Rediscovered" 398
- Paul Kennedy, "The (Relative) Decline of America" 418
- Barbara Tuchman, "America as Idea" 432
- William H. McNeill, "The Care and Repair of Public Myth" 435

Introduction: Myth and History

"Human Being is a featherless, storytelling animal. . . ." We tell stories—myths—about who we are, where we come from, where we are going and how we should live. And the myths we tell become who we are and what we believe—as individuals, families, whole cultures.¹

The appearance of this third edition of *Myth and the American Experience* strongly suggests that many readers of our earlier editions have found myth an especially useful perspective from which to view the nation's past. In the interest of making this mythic perspective more explicit, we address these questions: What is myth? What is myth's relationship to history? Why study American history in terms of myth? And how does this third edition aid in answering these questions?

Myth and history always have enjoyed a close relationship. In preliterate societies, a sense of origins and traditions was preserved in cultural memory through stories told by elders whose task it was to be custodians of the past and the past's interpreters to the present. In ancient societies, myths were thus the "storied" explanations in both oral and, later, written form of the past order of things and how the culture had come through time to its current circumstance. While not always—or even often—completely "true" renditions of the culture's past, myths' power lay more with their capacity to provide a sense of cultural continuity. In brief, myths always have been the traditional stories a culture tells itself about itself.

Today the fashion regarding myth is to associate it with the ancient world—as Greek myths, for example, told fantastic tales of gods and heroes and collective cultural accomplishments. Also dating to classical times is the common historic usage of *myth* as a pejorative term, a synonym for "lie," "fabrication," or "false belief." Plato often emphasized this highly negative view towards myths, declaring them to be little more than silly beliefs on false parade. Aristotle, on the other hand, thought of myths as more serious—even useful—as a treasury of cultural stories about the past that provide meaning for the present. Myths function, he concluded, as a kind of cultural glue that holds a people together—however great their diversity. Aristotle's view was that a mythic tale may well be factually suspect even as it conveys the under-

lying realities of the culture. A myth could then be factually false and psychologically true simultaneously. Those who associate myth with falsehood wish to invalidate it historically; but as Aristotle and others began to recognize, such attacks are powerless against myth's psychological potency within the context of the culture that chooses to believe it. Since Greek times, then, the understanding and use of myth have been ambivalent—implying both falsehood and truth. To the degree that a uniform opinion had formed in the Greek world regarding myth, it was simply that myth was a traditional story—perhaps false, perhaps true.

Throughout subsequent history, the view continued to be voiced that myth was a mutation of historical fact, and thus more false than true. Just as creditable over time, however, has been the view that myth is allegorical, discussing cultural values under other images containing a special brand of truth. Thus, as with so many other features of Western culture, the shaping of opinion and attitude about myths bears a distinct Hellenic imprint. Armed with these countervailing approaches to myth begun by the Greeks, the West has since sat Janus-faced, viewing myth as both negative and positive, as both profane and sacred.

So it has been, too, that a dialectical use of the term *myth* in American historical studies mirrors this ambivalence with which Western culture has long contended. Reflecting this tradition, the term *myth*, as presented in this set of readings, is utilized in two ways. In many instances the material, at least implicitly, reflects what one might call a Platonic tradition. This tradition has been rearticulated by the American historian Thomas A. Bailey, who over two decades ago wrote, "A historical myth is . . . an account or belief which is demonstrably untrue in whole or substantial part."² Historians reflecting this definition choose to emphasize the negative aspects of myth, to isolate and debunk what they regard as erroneous belief and misguided scholarship. The goal of historical study, as those of the Plato/Bailey tradition would have it, lies especially with recording history "as it actually happened." The historian, they insist, must stand as a transparent witness to the occurrences of the past. The truth, if diligently sought and recorded, will out.

Other American historians, however, deal with myth in a way fundamentally sympathetic to Aristotelian thinking, as did Henry Nash Smith in his famous study *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. For Smith, a cultural or social myth, even while often factually false, needs to be sympathetically reckoned with, in that it contains an internal treasure—a culture's ideological foundations. Thus are myths useful fictions for a culture. When sensitively deconstructed, they can be shown to embody American culture's basic beliefs and highest aspirations—honesty, unpretentiousness, optimism, tolerance, hard work, sympathy for the underdog, dedication to God and country, an abiding concern for all, and a special esteem for freedom. Myths are especially powerful, rich, and revealing for students and scholars to study because they are inspiring tales ripe with culturally received wisdom. Myth, says Smith, is culturally significant in that it is "an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image."³ Myth is, so to speak, a mental movie, with accompanying script, which Americans carry around in

their heads regarding their heritage and sense of special destiny. The American past is therefore scarcely a dead past; the past effects a presiding influence over the present. It continues to live within us. Myth lays claim to preserving, repeating, and defending the treasury of wisdom our forebears entrusted to us.

In summary, then, one school of thought on American historical myth seeks to emphasize historical inaccuracies, while the other approaches myth from the vantage point of social psychology. One sees myth as the by-product of historical scholarship (or lack of it), while the other demonstrates a marked concern for the ways in which myth serves the decidedly positive function of unifying cultural experience, providing, in the words of the literary scholar Mark Schorer, "a large controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life. . . ."⁴ Certainly at times both senses of myth are present; on occasion they tend to blend to the point of becoming nearly indistinguishable. Both notions of myth are germane to the study of American history.

University of Chicago historian William H. McNeill further observes that "myth and history are close kin inasmuch as both explain how things got to be the way they are by telling some sort of story."⁵ In this way, history is "mythic" in Aristotle's and Henry Nash Smith's sense of the word, for history offers by its very nature a narrative reconstruction, a *story* of the past. This clear linkage of *story* and *history* is rather clearly recognized in some cultures. In the Italian and Spanish languages, for example, the words *history* and *story* are interchangeable. Historians are essentially the storytellers of the "tribe," functioning as purveyors of cultural stories. In this sense, surely, historians are mythmakers.

Historians also function as mythmakers in that, being human, they reflect their personal backgrounds, their times, their methodologies, their current interests—including biases and prejudices, and sometimes even their whims. All historical interpretation, in other words, is both personally contemporary and ideological—such is the nature of what has been called "the politics of interpretation." Moreover, historians constantly revise each other's work and sometimes even their own. This process of mythmaking by professional historians—myths as a critical by-product of what historians do—is given major emphasis in this work.

In addition to formal, academic study of American history, a sense of the past is frequently derived from a vast array of informational sources constantly assaulting the average citizen with a barrage of historical "facts" with implicit interpretations. These, too, structure and sustain the illusions and traditional stories—the myths—about America's past. Television and film especially, two of American culture's favorite recreations, transmit images and "re-creations" of the past in appealing sight and sound to eager audiences, most often with an eye to drama rather than solid research and scholarly validity. Similarly, "historical" novels, poetry, political rhetoric, children's literature, paintings, ballads, oral traditions, folklore, political cartoons, tourist shrines, and culturally induced sexist and racist stereotypes contribute in their own ways to our collective impression of the past. In the aggregate, they probably represent as consistent and enduring a fund of "historical" information as what we learn in more formalized educational settings. As Americans "make up their mind" about their cultural traditions, they fashion a colorful mental mosaic of their

history. Song, story, nostalgia, and the ever-present media reinforce the picture. Such "mythic" history works its way to a level of operational reality when people act as if the myths are true. Policies—even laws—are based on them. In this way, the making of myths is a process by which a culture perpetuates its grandest illusions as it gives substance, order, and stability to its world.

Taking all of the above considerations into account, this new edition of *Myth and the American Experience* views myth on two levels—as a matter of correcting what is false or at least highly suspect about one's sense of the past, even while realizing myth to be highly emblematic of the nation's desires, dreams, and values. As the mathematician-turned-philosopher Alfred North Whitehead succinctly put the matter to a Virginia audience over half a century ago:

The art of a free society consists first in the maintenance of the symbolic code; and secondly in a fearlessness of revision, to secure that the code serves those purposes which satisfy an enlightened reason. Those societies which cannot combine reverence to their symbols with freedom of revision, must ultimately decay either from anarchy, or from the slow atrophy of a life stifled by useless shadows.⁶

Seeking to offer cautionary comment as to American culture's many "useless shadows" while still cultivating a decent respect for "the symbolic code," this new edition offers much fresh material: on American Indians, the Great Awakening, colonial women, the American Revolution, Andrew Jackson, the Chicano experience, southern women, slavery, Abraham Lincoln, Reconstruction, the Gilded Age, Victorian sexuality, the American working class, the two Roosevelts, women's suffrage and feminism, immigration and minorities, the Great Depression, Pearl Harbor and Japanese Americans, the Eisenhower presidency, and the contemporary American scene—among other topics. Together with the many classic essays from earlier editions of this work, these new readings ought to contribute to a clearer yet critical vision of the nation's past. It is hoped that this selective study of myth and the American experience will launch the reader on an especially rewarding journey through America's storied mythic past.

Notes

1. Sam Keen, "Personal Myths Guide Daily Life: The Stories We Live By," *Psychology Today* (December 1989), p. 44.
2. Thomas A. Bailey, "The Mythmakers of American History," *The Journal of American History*, 55 (June 1968), p. 5.
3. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York, 1950), p. v.
4. Mark Schorer, "The Necessity of Myth," in Henry A. Murray (ed.), *Myth and Myth-making* (New York, 1960), p. 355.
5. William H. McNeill, "Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians," *The American Historical Review*, 91 (February 1986), p. 1.
6. Alfred North Whitehead, *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect* (New York, 1959), p. 88.

Myths of the Civil War and Reconstruction

A great literature will yet arise out of the era of those four [Civil War] years, those scenes—era compressing centuries of native passion, first-class pictures, tempests of life and death—an inexhaustible mine for the histories, drama, romance, and even philosophy, of peoples to come—indeed the verteber of poetry and art (of personal character too) for all future America—far more grand, in my opinion, to the hands capable of it, than Homer's siege of Troy, or the French wars to Shakespeare.

Walt Whitman (1879)

There they are, cutting each other's throats, because one half of them prefer hiring their servants for life, and the other by the hour.

Thomas Carlyle

Stephen B. Oates,
"Abraham Lincoln:
The Man Behind the Myths"

Eric Foner,
"The New View of Reconstruction"

Thomas C. Cochran,
"Did the Civil War Retard
Industrialization?"

Richard White,
"The Winning of the West:
The Expansion of the Western Sioux"



The Glorious: John A. Logan in action. [Virginia State Library and Archives.]



The Terrible: Union dead after Gettysburg. [Reproduced from the collections of the Library of Congress.]