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SUBLIMINAL POLITICS MYTHS & MYTHMAKERS IN AMERICA



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Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.

By Order of the Author

MARK TWAIN

Huckleberry Finn

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PREFACE

University. Jan Trice and Karen Johnson of the University of Tennessee provided helpful proofing of the manuscript. Heath Silberfeld guided the work skillfully through production for Spectrum Books. Again it was a pleasure to work with Spectrum's Director, Michael Hunter. Finally, and foremost, this book is dedicated to Jackie Combs, mother of one of the authors.

Given the market glut, there is scarcely room for yet another book purporting to describe what people know about American politics. This is not such a book. There is, however, ample reason for a book discussing what people *think* they know about American politics. This is that book. Specifically, our topic is the taken-for-granted set of assumptions, conceptions, and ideas about American politics that lies below the threshold of consciousness, that substantial realm of dramatic accounts whose accuracy and plausibility go largely unquestioned. In short, this is a book about myths of American politics and the persons who make and help plant them in our subconscious—politicians, political press agents, popular entertainers, journalists, pollsters, and political scientists.

Two points about our topic and our treatment of it warrant emphasis. First, we avoid the all-too-easily-voiced view that myths by their very nature are false ideas. For us myth is a nonperjorative term. A myth may be true, false, or both. The key characteristic of myth, however, is that it is a dramatic representation of past, present, or future events that people *believe*.

Second, we identify and discuss the actors in the American political drama who we regard as key mythmakers. We describe the myths they make and how they do it. Our intent is not to demean, degrade, or disparage. Rather it is to remind. Myth is so common in American politics, and mythmaking so pervasive, that the creation and communication of mythical accounts has become subliminal, that is, people engage in it without even realizing it happens, just as they accept the credibility of those accounts unthinkingly. By reminding ourselves that all manner of political actors engage in mythmaking—including the authors of this book along with other political scientists—we hope to alert readers to the mythical components of what passes for political knowledge and make those who deny that they do so more circumspect in their mythmaking.

In the process of generating, organizing, and articulating the ideas in this presentation, each of the authors had occasion to test out those thoughts on unsuspecting students in lecture and seminar courses. For their patience and radical skepticism we are thankful. Dorothy Herscher did an admirable job in typing early drafts of the manuscript, and Paulette Acres—certainly one of the most reliable of persons at her task—typed the final version. The completion of the work was facilitated by financial assistance provided through Dean Howard Peters and Vice President John Strietelmeier of Valparaiso