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CHAPTER

The Unicorn Is A Mythical Beast And There Are A Lot Of Unicorns In Politics

formed the husband that the wife was "crazy as a jay bird," and off the police went with her. The husband, reported Thurber, lived happily ever after. The moral? Don't count your boobies until they are hatched!

Like most of Thurber's fables, this one teaches an important lesson, caught ironically in the statement, "The unicorn is a mythical beast." For that "nonexistent" beast, in an important sense, did exist. The beast had reality and consequences. The unicorn was real in the sense that someone believed, or believed that other people believed, in its existence. And the reality of the beast had consequences in that its existence resulted in a sudden change in a marital situation. The unicorn was decidedly not a mythical beast.

If people define situations as real, a noted social scientist said, they are real in their consequences.² The moral of Thurber's tale and the sociologist's dictum imply that if people believe something to be so, in an important way, it is. Now this runs against commonplace views about reality. We like to think that there is a clear distinction between the real and the imaginary, that our experience can be relied on, and that valid knowledge of the world "out there" is possible. But the world is more complicated than that, and our easy knowledge of it is not as sure as we might like to think.

At the risk of sounding philosophical, we may ask ourselves the age-old question: What, after all, do we really know? We are mortal, finite, limited beings who exist in a particular space and time, culture and personality. The amount of knowledge—in whatever form—available to us in any situation is limited, as are the capacity of our brains and the willingness of our personalities to accept certain things. Nevertheless, we have to cope with the onrush of experience, the necessity of choice, the desire to understand. And so we *define* situations as real and act upon that knowledge. We use our imaginations to extend our experience. We build our image of the world by making connections, constructions, and pictures of reality *as if* they were true. We impute an order and meaning to the world by importing into our images of the world a variety of symbolic structures to which we give reality, including unicorns.

For example, take an individual life. We live in a crucible of ex-

Four decades ago, the late James Thurber, one of America's wisest writers, published a tale entitled "The Unicorn in the Garden." It went like this:

One morning as a man was having breakfast he looked out his window and saw a white unicorn with a golden horn munching roses in the garden. The man arose, went to the bedroom, awakened his sleeping wife and told her of the unicorn. "The unicorn is a mythical beast," she retorted, then went back to sleep. The man turned, went downstairs, and out into the garden. There was the unicorn, now eating tulips. The man pulled up a lily, gave it to the unicorn, and the lily too was consumed. Back the man went to his wife, roused her, and explained what had happened. Whereupon the wife pronounced her husband a "booby" that should be put in the "booby hatch." This upset the man. He returned to the garden. But, lo, the unicorn had gone, so the man sat down among the flowers and went to sleep. Meanwhile his wife arose, dressed, and telephoned the police and a psychiatrist. She demanded they bring a strait jacket. The police and psychiatrist arrived and the wife related the story—how her husband "saw a unicorn this morning," how it had eaten a lily, and had a golden horn on its forehead. Suddenly the police seized the wife and after a terrific struggle, subdued her, placing her in the strait jacket. Just then the man entered the house to find his wife trussed up. "Did you tell your wife you saw a unicorn?" asked the psychiatrist. "Of course not," replied the husband. "The unicorn is a mythical beast." The psychiatrist apologized, in-

perence and a fund of consciousness. One develops an image of oneself that changes as time goes by. That image may be distorted by attributing qualities to ourselves that we do not possess. Through memory, we may distort past events in our lives, giving them characteristics of value they did not have (in, say, the transformation of childhood into a Golden Age one would now like to recapture). Similarly, we can project great expectations into a future through images of what we desire to be (as into career fulfillment). Our imaginations add to our immediate sensible experience, extending our vistas and the quality of our lives beyond what is immediate, palpable, and real.

So it is with our image of politics. "The world we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind," said Walter Lippman, one of this nation's foremost political analysts.³ Yet there are clearly things we believe about the political world, even though we have not directly experienced them. We believe there was a presidential election in 1976, that there is an administration in Washington, and that there is a possibility of nuclear war with the Russians. These are facts of the contemporary political reality. There are probably ways to check some facts for their accuracy. Most of the time we do not; we simply accept those facts as true. Thus, in the dynamics of political situations, we have to rely on a jumble of images, most of which are not sensible to our immediate situation, to build a mosaic of what is happening. Such images are a shifting combination of facts, prejudices, values, pictures, memories, and projections. Taken together, they constitute what we shall argue in this book are the mythical beasts of politics.

We, the authors of this book, may be accused by readers of being—like the husband in Thurber's tale—a couple of boobies. We see a lot of mythical beasts in the rose garden of American politics. We see them in America's political past and in the present, and we most assuredly think that they will be with us in the future. And we see a lot of people feeding flowers to those mythical beasts: politicians and their publicity agents, the purveyors of popular culture, journalists and pollsters, and even our colleagues—the social, political, and behavioral scientists. Are we crazy as jay birds? Perhaps. That is for our readers to decide.

A LINGERING FASCINATION WITH UNICORNS Or What Politicians and Scholars Have Said About Myth

"Mythology distracts us everywhere—in government as in business, in politics as in economics, in foreign affairs as in domestic policy. . . . The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived, and dishonest—but the myth, persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic. Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forbears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought."¹

The time was June 11, 1962. The place was Yale University. The address was entitled "Myths Respecting American Government." The speaker was the president of the United States, John F. Kennedy. Many are the politicians who exploit myths for a variety of reasons, both self-serving and altruistic. But few have been those to speak directly about the nature of myth and the role of myths in American political life. In doing so in his Yale address, Kennedy (who became the legendary figure in a Camelot myth of his own and others' making) called attention to three questions about myths, political myths included, that warrant consideration:

What are myths, especially political myths, and why do people of intelligence, education, and alleged breeding so often dismiss the assertions of some other persons as mere myths, obviously the concoctions of boobies and jay birds?

What are the characteristics of myths? Are they, as Kennedy suggested, "unrealistic," or might those unicorns not be instead the very core of our realities, our political realities?

Why do we have myths, especially among a people as enlightened by science and technology as are Americans? Perhaps W.C. Fields was right when he supposedly said, "Ahh, yes! A man has to believe in something, and I believe I'll have another drink." Are our myths about politics but a bit of libation?

What are myths? Answers to the first of our three questions have been posed by classicists, philosophers, anthropologists, lin-

guistic scholars, social scientists, even folklorists. The resulting assertions provide a plethora of definitions, theories, and schools of thought. Consider the following clues to the character of a myth.

The Common Sense School

Drop what you're doing, go where a lot of people gather, say, a fast food restaurant. As you stand in line to order your Big Mac, Colonel Sanders, or one of the seeming infinity of ice cream flavors, strike up a conversation with the person behind you. Politely suggest that the food at this establishment does not differ in quality from that of any other fast food chain. Say, for instance, "It's a myth that a Big Mac is better than a Whopper; they're just alike." With such a statement, you have captured the essentials of a common sense approach to myth—that is, a myth has no foundation in fact; it is simply another word for illusion.

The common sense school of myths has many members, some of them lifelong students of myths. For example, two historians, Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords, have written a fascinating text that challenges a very high proportion of the beliefs taught in American schools and colleges as being mythical.⁵ We will discuss a few of their ideas more in Chapter 2. Here, however, it suffices to note that they define a myth as a false belief that is traditionally accepted as true and taken to be real.

A renowned European philosopher, Ernst Cassirer, probably did more than any other modern theorist to explore the place of myths in contemporary politics.⁶ His view of myths also emphasized the illusory, distorted quality of such beliefs. Cassirer drew a distinction between what he called the mythical consciousness of primitive peoples and the scientific consciousness of modern persons. Members of primitive cultures, he wrote, conceive things in immediate, concrete ways and endow objects and events with unique personalities. Death, for example, is a personalized force that "comes," "stalks," and "goes." Rivers are not just bodies of water; they have minds of their own, as when they *refuse* to rise. Old Ben intoning, "May the Force be with you" in the popular film *Star Wars* exemplified what Cassirer was writing about, a mythical outlook on the world that could explain cause and effect as flowing from a vital force. But, in contrast with

primitives, argued Cassirer, the scientific consciousness of modern persons draws a distinction between illusion and fact. Impressions of things and the feelings those things evoke are critically checked against experience and evidence. Emotional attachments to totems, magic, astrology, and ritual are replaced by hard-headed appeals to reason, facts, experiment, and proof.

For Cassirer, then, mythical thinking is a reversion to childlike make-believe, to primitive mysticism. The mythical world-view of prescientific peoples simply could not, or at least should not, exist alongside the empirical, scientific outlook of modern societies. What vexed Cassirer was that myth and science *do* reside side by side in the modern world.⁷

Cassirer's views are a sophisticated version of a common sense approach to myth: At best, myths are simplistic and distorted beliefs based upon emotion rather than rigorous analysis; at worst, myths are dangerous falsifications. Before accepting, rejecting, or modifying the common usage of the term, let us consider other schools of thought.

The Timeless Truth School

Before President Jimmy Carter's brother Billy sought rehabilitation for alcoholism, he was not the only American who liked to drink beer. Seemingly the only thing approaching the gulping multitudes of beer drinkers are the numerous brands of beer. Is one brand superior to all others? There are two myths: first, the myth carefully nurtured by advertisers that "_____ is Good, Better, Best." Just ask the connoisseur. Second, there is the myth implied in "They all taste the same to me"—the myth of no, rather than *vive*, difference. Which myth is true, which false? The common sense school tells us that both are false, and perhaps they are. The timeless truth school would have us think that both may be true, and perhaps they are.

The timeless truth school emphasizes not the substantive facts contained in a myth—not whether or not George Washington did or did not confess to chopping down the famous cherry tree—but whether people believe the myth, regardless of its accuracy. Myths are thus taken to be true in the sense that they are believed. So, to the beer drinker of discriminating palate, Coors, Michelob, Olympia, Löwenbrau, or whatever reigns supreme; to others, "Beer's beer."

Like the common sense school, the timeless truth view has a sophisticated version. Identified with the scholarly writing of Mircea Eliade, it argues that a myth is an account believed to be true, an account that describes an event occurring in the "beginnings of time" that explains the origin of things and, through their origins, how things are now.⁸ Hence, myths are timeless truths. Consider, for instance, the myth of Eden. The account states as fact a series of events not demonstrably true or false, but taken on trust by many people. Denied admission to Eden because of the sins of their forebears, the descendants of Adam and Eve wander through the world seeking to recover the perfection of primordial beginnings, to restore the energy, grace, and bliss of things as they were when the world was new.

Possession and denial, loss and recovery, depletion and restoration, death and rebirth—such are the themes common to myths viewed as timeless truths. The timeless truths about beers do not differ. This is particularly evident in the mythmaking televised commercials that identify brands of beers with the purity of primal times and ways (e.g., the land of sky blue waters; clear, babbling brooks and mountain streams; the finest barleys and hops; the brewing art of the ancient masters; etc.). A search for recoverable origins—therein lies the character of myth as timeless truth.

The "What You See Is Not What You Get" School

A third set of views about myths shares something with both the common sense theories and the timeless truths school. With the former, it holds that the surface content of myths is false. With the latter, it agrees that, if we delve beneath the surface, there are realities represented in mythical tales.

What are these "hidden meanings" of myths? The oldest answer goes back to classical antiquity, at least to the Stoics. Myths, they said, should not be read as they stand, but as allegories masking a moral or philosophical lesson. What the precise hidden meaning was of such parables, metaphors, and stories the Stoics and succeeding generations of allegorists could never agree upon. Their interpretations of hidden meanings were arbitrary and presumptuous, for the meaning given a myth by the interpreter was taken for granted as more real or true than any intended by the original mythmaker.

Classical antiquity offered another answer, however—that is, that myths are accounts of past personages or events rather than morality plays. By translating myths, therefore, one could arrive at what really happened in earlier times. The problem with this, the Euhemerist view, differs little from the view of the allegorist. If myths are garbled history, whose deciphering provides the most plausible historical account? And why is one account more authentic than another?

The German idealists of the nineteenth century took another crack at opening the core meaning of myths. For them, people act as they think; change people's ideas, and you change how they lead their lives. Ideas do not change willy-nilly, but in conformity with the logic of an overarching Mind or Spirit guiding historical destiny. Given these assumptions, it is but a small step to argue that myths embody the inner truth of the Spirit, or climate, of the times that binds a people through shared attitudes, opinions, preconceptions, aspirations, hopes, anxieties, and fears.

Perhaps the Spirit of History does move among us, but modern interpreters of myth have had no easier time of identifying its character than did the allegorists or the Euhemerists. Small wonder, then, that they have turned elsewhere in search of the hidden meaning of myths. Although that search has yielded provocative insights into the character of mythical thought generally, if there is a hidden meaning below the surface of particular myths, it remains as lost as the fabled continent of Atlantis. Without belaboring the description of each, here are a few of the theories generated by the searchers after true meanings:

Myth is an ancient form of speech. Like the allegorists and the Euhemerists, these searchers seek the essentials of myths in poetical allusions and metaphors. Unlike their predecessors, however, these mythbreakers argue that *all* myths share a common theme. That theme, according to Henry Tudor's concise analysis, is "the rising and setting of the sun and the daily conflict between light and darkness." Poking fun, Tudor remarks, "It was clear that, with sufficient ingenuity, anything from the song of sixpence to the career of Napoleon could be proved a solar myth—the migration of the sun from east to west, of darkness from west to east."⁹

Myths are primitive explanations of things that spark the curiosities of both savages and civilized persons. This appears identical to Cassirer's view, but there is a difference. Cassirer argued that myth is a childlike world outlook held by primitives. But myths considered as explanations are not Cassirer's *Weltanschauung* covering all reality; they are specific stories invented to account for specific events. Myth is not an isolated province of thought that sharply differs from a scientific worldview; rather, myth is the science of the primitive and what Frazer, in his classic study of magic and religion in human culture, *The Golden Bough*, called "the bastard-sister of science."¹⁰

Myth is ritual. This view, too, is a variation of the ratio that myth is to science as primitive is to modern. Here is the reasoning: Primitives developed rituals (rites, prayers, dances, incantations, etc.) to help them secure from the gods and nature the necessities of health, food, water, children, and so on. As means of emotional outlet, rituals have two sides: physical act (e.g., dancing) and verbal utterance. It is in the verbal utterance that myths are born—as parables, tales, narratives, and stories.

The Symbolic School

The reader can be forgiven for thinking that theories about myth overlap. A brief account of three theories purporting to describe what myths symbolize beyond the content of the myths themselves makes the overlap even more apparent.

Dreams are the stuff that myths are made of. In this day and age, we have come to expect a Freudian theory of everything, and myths are no exception. The theory derives from Freud's view that dreams are made up of symbols representing unfulfilled wishes. Through dreams, the wishes are symbolically fulfilled. Since many symbols that occur in dreams also occur in myths, myths, like dreams, are products of fantasy, of the unconscious. But individuals have dreams, whereas whole societies have myths. How can something personal and private be so collectivized? The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung suggested an answer: Below the surface of each individual's per-

sonal unconscious is a deeper *collective* unconscious, what Jung called "archetypes" or "universal images" that are suprapersonal and are shaped by everybody in society.¹¹ The hidden meaning of myths (sometimes called "mythemes," for universal mythical themes) is that they symbolize these archetypes.

Myth as social glue. The quest for the real meaning of myths has also goaded sociologists and anthropologists. Three characterizations emerge. First, *myths are collective representations*—that is, catch-all accounts encompassing a society's doctrines, ideologies, ideas, and interests. Even if embodied in a single leader, as was the racial myth of Aryan superiority by Hitler for the Nazis, the myth and its embodiment form a collective representation that is essentially impersonal—a part of a group member's being, much like one's language. Second, the idea of *myths as functional requisites* derives from the extensive work of cultural anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski and his followers.¹² The theory assumes that people and societies have basic needs that must be fulfilled if they are to survive. Functions are defined as activities undertaken to satisfy such needs. Key social needs are to assure and enhance group solidarity and to legitimize the authority of some members of society to act and others to follow. Myths symbolize codes of approved beliefs, values, and behavior and thus function to legitimize authority. Finally, there is the theory that *myths symbolize underlying structures*. The science of structural linguistics, from which this theory derives, posits that language is governed by laws—or structures—imposed on the unconscious mind, laws or structures that cannot be violated by speakers of that language. Extending that assumption beyond language leads to the proposition that all institutions and activities are governed by unconscious, underlying structures. To understand the activities, therefore, their hidden structures must be uncovered. Such is also the case with myths; that is, below the manifest content of myths (which often seems silly, foolish, false, and contradictory) are coherent, lawful structures guiding human conduct.

Myths as political ploys. To this juncture, we have already reviewed the theories of two writers that suggest what myths symbolize in politics: Cassirer's view that political myths operate as emo-

tional, primitive world-views that endanger rational decision making and Malinowski's thesis that myths symbolize and legitimize political authority. Tangential to the first is the political science proposition that myths are symbols used by political elites to arouse and command the popular support of the masses, thus rationalizing and advancing elitist interests in the name of the public good. Think, for example, of how many American politicians invoked the myths surrounding 1776 during the 1976 election-year bicentennial celebration of independence; were the orations always altruistic? The Malinowski thesis also has support from political scientists. Long before he achieved notoriety as President Jimmy Carter's chief foreign policy advisor, for instance, Zbigniew Brzezinski co-authored a major study of totalitarian dictatorship which argued that a myth is a story about a nation's past events used to reinforce the authority of the existing regime.¹³ Similarly the noted French political sociologist, Jacques Ellul, speaks of myths as public illusions that mask the real distribution of power and benefits in society.¹⁴ Students of politics, then, also assume that there is something more to myth than a simple fairy tale.

YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN Therein Lies the Nature of Myth

With these ideas borrowed from scholarly schools of thought before us, we can now fashion answers to the three questions posed earlier: What are myths, what is their character, and why do we have them?

Looking Backward

George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) was one of America's most noted philosophers. Succeeding generations of scholars have lauded and evaluated Mead's contributions to the development of pragmatic ways of thinking; his theories regarding the development of the human mind, the self, and society; and his seminal ideas with respect to symbols in human communication. We turn to a different facet of Mead's thought, one that will help us to explore the foundations of myth. Specifically, we look at Mead's "philosophy of the present."

Can we ever really know the past? This is the problem Mead posed. He answered that we cannot. Why? Because "a past never was in the form it appears as a past; its reality is in its interpretation of the present."¹⁵ People, argued Mead, are prisoners of time in the sense that their reality is always only a *present* reality—what they perceive in the here and now. "Reality exists in a present," he said, and "the present of course implies a past and a future," but "to these both we deny existence."¹⁶ This is not to say that people don't *imagine* or think that they recall a past and *imagine* or project a future. They most certainly do. But they do so not *in* that past or *in* that future but only in the present.

Thus argued, any vision of the past is every bit as hypothetical as any image of the future. Neither is exhibited to us from other than the perspective of the present, *wherein we live*. But, one might retort, granted that we can't really know the future until it happens, surely we can know the past, for it has already happened. We have records, documents, accounts, names, and dates—the stuff of history! Yes, said Mead, we may have all that information about things that have happened earlier. But when do we make sense of it, interpret it, give meaning to it? Not in some unrecoverable past, but in the present. Our past, therefore, our "what was," is not what really happened but a present interpretation, a reconstruction of what might have been. At best, it is but one possibility of what might have gone before. For Mead, then, there simply is no real past back "there" that is irrevocable. Since interpretations and meanings in the present are subject to change, no scroll unrolls an unalterable past.

What Mead is also saying is that knowing is a constructive—indeed, reconstructive—activity: that through our present interpretations, we construct the meanings of the past and the future. These constructions represent what we know, or, more accurately, in any given present, they re-present what we know. Mead goes on to argue that such constructions derive from people interacting with another. In short, our constructions of the realities of the past and the future are social constructions undertaken in the present. These re-presentations are neither static nor fixed but are continuously emerging from ongoing social processes. What we know is not a collection of knowns, but an activity of knowing.

If Mead is correct, then as humans living in the present, we re-present the past and re-present the future. When those re-presenta-

tions take dramatic form, we have myths. All events, wrote the distinguished literary critic Kenneth Burke, occur as dramas and can be depicted in dramatic form.¹⁷ At least this is so of all human events, because what distinguishes humans is that they are symbol-creating, -using, and -misusing animals. Symbols are the essentials of drama. Burke devised a pentad of the five key elements symbolized in any drama: the act, the agent(s) committing the act, the agency(ies) used to commit the act, the scene—time, place, and setting—wherein the act occurs, and the purposes or motives behind the act. For Burke, there was a logic to the interplay of these five dramatic elements. Precisely that dramatic logic, or form, constitutes the vital character of myth, both for Burke and for us.

Here, then, with due recognition of the contributions by Mead and Burke, is our definition (myth?) of myth:

A credible, dramatic, socially constructed re-presentation of perceived realities that people accept as permanent, fixed knowledge of reality while forgetting (if they were ever aware of it) its tentative, imaginative, created, and perhaps fictional qualities.

This is obviously the broadest kind of definition, but it does have certain advantages for our purposes. Myth is not confined to a fantastic tale of the immortals long ago; it can include current myths held about the world right now. Myth is not reduced to being merely a story; it is not simply a fairy tale or an allegorical narrative. Nor is it a child's or primitive's world-view. And it avoids the pitfall of reducing myth solely to false belief. The definition offered here was the advantage of including myths at a variety of levels and in different contexts. It stresses that myth is something thought to be real and believable; that it adds dramatic color and force to an otherwise inchoate reality; that it re-presents what we take to be real, and thus serves important psychological and social functions for us; and that it gives us a world out there that we can cope with and understand.

Myth and Science Among the Moderns

Ponder other key implications of this definition. First, we assert that myths are *credible*. Every myth is not a truth: Some may even be deliberate falsifications of what they purport to represent, others

simply tales that distort more than illuminate. The myth of the pre-Civil War black as "the happy darcy"—lazy, shiftless, easygoing, and childlike—was a stereotype deliberately used for a century after the conflict in order to justify second-class citizenship for an entire people. The legendary antebellum South of plantations, magnolias, cavaliers, and auburn-haired maidens, so well depicted in the opening scenes of the ever popular film *Gone With the Wind*, may have been a less deliberate, but no less distorted, nostalgic representation. Emphasizing the credible character of myths, however, guards against the too easy tendency to assume that *all* myths are false; moreover, it assists us in our basic task in this book—that is, to identify the salient myths and their makers in American politics rather than to describe what really happened or happens, which is made unlikely from the perspective of any given present. Saying that myths are credible, then, stresses our interest in identifying what people believe to be true, whether that belief be true, false, a little of both, or simply not demonstrable as either. Walter Lippmann summarized these points thus: "For the distinguishing mark of myth is that truth and error, fact and fable, report and fantasy are all on the same plane of credibility. . . . What a myth never contains is the critical power to separate its truth from its error."¹⁸

Second, myths are *socially constructed, created realities*. There are two intertwined notions here. One is that what is real consists of the pictures of the world that people invent and accept; there are as many realities about something as are created. But, and this is the second notion, myths are shared realities, pictures constructed through social intercourse. Granted that myths are often created by specific individuals, in specific times and places. The mythmaker offers a picture of a past or present state of affairs and projects it to other times—past, present, future. Alex Haley, for instance, in his best-selling *Roots*, created a virtual myth of paradise by depicting the life and times of the black in his native Africa, a paradise that was lost when the slave trade inhumanly ripped people away from their heritage. But the tale of that narrative was shared by millions who read the book and/or watched the enthralling 1977 television mini-series based upon it. Therein occurred the collective construction of a credible reality, the making of a myth.

Third, a myth is a *dramatic whole*, an account containing, implicitly or explicitly, the five elements of Burke's dramatic pentad and

generally told complete with a beginning, a middle, and an end.¹⁹ As a result, a myth conveys the impression of a complete entity in which everything fits comfortably with everything else. By associating things with one another, parts of the story that alone might appear imprecise and incredulous assume the appearance of authenticity. Apocryphal tales, such as that Betsy Ross sewed the first American flag at the request of George Washington, that the Liberty Bell cracked at the stress of proclaiming American independence (no record exists that the bell chimed at all during the period, but there *is* evidence that it cracked in 1835 while tolling for Chief Justice John Marshall's funeral), and that independence came on July 4, 1776 (the *Declaration* was adopted on July 2 and announced on July 8, but the date of the signing is questionable), are much more plausible when blended into a single myth of the Revolution than when related in isolation.

Fourth, myths are *taken-for-granted realities*. That is, once people believe in a myth, their skeptical sense vanishes, they accept it as fact, and—most importantly—the invented reality becomes reality itself, the only reality. Put differently, in creating myths, we invent realities, forget that they are inventions, and then experience our creations as something out there that is—for the life of the myth—the one, fixed, permanent reality of things.²⁰ This contributes to a fifth implication, that myths are *pragmatic*: “A myth is *told*,” notes Tudor, “not for the sake of amusement, but in order to *promote some practical purpose*.”²¹ If myths were popularly accepted simply as folk tales, they would be little more than entertainment. But when accepted as *reality*, they can be employed by all manner of persons—demagogues, pitchmen, con artists, hucksters, soothsayers—to serve selfish ends and by all manner of other people purporting more reputable, altruistic ends.

Flowing from our definition and its attendant implications is one other point: that *mythical and scientific thinking are related but distinct activities*. They are related in that, for one thing, they are both modes of knowing—that is, ways of representing, describing, explaining, and interpreting observed phenomena. They are, as Frazer asserted in *The Golden Bough*, natural, human efforts to understand the world. Moreover, even though it produced vexation for Cassirer to face it, mythical and scientific thought rest side by side in modern civilizations.

But the two modes of knowing differ in critical respects. As we have reiterated, and as Tudor summarizes so well, “A myth, I suggest, is an interpretation of what the mythmaker (rightly or wrongly) takes to be hard fact. It is a device men adopt in order to come to grips with reality; and we can tell that a given account is myth, not by the amount of truth it contains, but by the fact that it is *believed* to be true and, above all, by the dramatic form into which it is cast.”²² In myth, the mode of *knowing* is supplanted by the belief that something is forever *known*. By contrast, in scientific thought, knowledge is not fixed but tentative; the search for understanding is not closed but forever open; constructions are not taken as real but are subject to experimentation and novel, truth-defying reconstructions. Moreover, the realities created by scientific thought about some phenomena are plural, each being recognized as but one of *possible* multiple interpretations of the event. In myth, there is but one interpretation, one reality of what happened. Finally, although the scientific enterprise can certainly be described in dramatic terms, scientific accounts are seldom cast in dramatic form with a beginning, a middle, and an end and with acts, scenes, agents, agencies, and purposes.

As activities, then, mythical and scientific thought are related, but different. Bear in mind, however, that there is a mythical dimension to scientific thought. That possibility has been suggested by many philosophers of science, most notably in America by Thomas Kuhn in his provocative *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.²³ Kuhn notes the tendency for science to become “normal,” to engage in the perfunctory verification of dominant theoretical outlooks in any historical period. During such a period, there is a reigning “paradigm,” a general agreement among scientists on theories, problem areas, methods, and techniques of inquiry and analysis. The paradigm is the common, shared set of beliefs of the scientific community. Are paradigms myths? If scientists close the door to alternative, novel, competing possibilities, the two may indeed be synonymous, at least to the degree that each becomes *the “reality” they think they know*. We think that may happen with some frequency in the social sciences directed at understanding American politics, a point we explore fully in Chapter 7. For now, however, we merely raise the possibility to caution against making the myth-science distinction too facile. Indeed, one of America's foremost social scientists, Talcott Parsons, has writ-

ten that the "facts" of science are myths. . . . We exclude—and what we exclude haunts us as the walls we set up. We include—and what we include limps, wounded by amputations. And, most importantly, we must live with all this, we must live with our wounded and our ghosts. There can be no Bultmann of science, pleading that we 'de-mythologize': *analytical thought itself is mythologization.*"²⁴

If Everybody Has to Believe in Something, Why Myths in a Scientific Age?

Myths are accepted uncritically by people because they perform several important, interrelated services. Four general uses of myth are especially noteworthy.

Myths aid comprehension. Whether in primitive societies, such as those depicted by anthropologists, or in highly civilized ones, neither mythical nor scientific thought pervades the whole of a people's consciousness. We undertake our everyday tasks, taking for granted that one day will not differ much from another. Habits, routines, pastimes—these offer continuity to our daily lives. But suppose that something happens, say, we become seriously ill, or we are victims of some natural disaster. The occurrence may tax our powers to deal with it. We are shocked out of our everyday consciousness to a new awareness, frequently to an awareness of discrepancies between what we think we ought to do, what we can do, and what we actually do. We suffer unwelcome contradictions; an incoherence stalks our lives. Here enters myth. Myths provide easily grasped, emotionally satisfying ways of reducing the disorder of things. Chaos and absurdity yield as every untoward act and event becomes comprehensible.²⁵

In his award-winning *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, playwright Edward Albee relates the tale of George and Martha, a married couple whose public and private lives are in sharp contradiction. In public, George is a sedate professor of history at the local college; Martha is a professor's wife and the daughter of the college president. But public appearances are contradicted by what goes on behind the closed doors of the marriage between George and Martha—a quarrelsome, bickering union of all-night shouting, drinking, tantrums, and threats. How is such a marriage held together? George and

Martha manage it by creating a myth, the myth of a nonexistent son: the "little bugger" who, depending upon the teller, is "away," "out" at the moment, grown up and "off to college," but who is never physically present. The play's crisis occurs when George, partly as a means of punishing Martha, reveals that the boy was "killed" in an auto accident. But even then it is not clear that the myth is dispelled, for as grieving "parents" they can still resolve contradictions in their lives by bemoaning the loss of the imaginary child.²⁶

In a related fashion, we have myths to reduce political contradictions. How, for example, can we comprehend that the affluent, industrialized American society contains widespread poverty, unemployment, and crime? Political scientist Murray Edelman says that we do it through myths, actually through two opposing myths: (1) One myth asserts that those who suffer from such problems are victims of their own defects and responsible for their own plight; hence, there is no societal solution, for the problems are personal, not social, problems. (2) The other myth says that the sufferers are victimized by the affluent elites who profit from depriving others and, who, in order to resolve the contradiction, simply reform a basically exploitative social structure.²⁷

But why create myths at all? Why not just live with our contradictions? Perhaps the answer lies in what philosopher William James called the "will to believe," the inability of people to be comfortable with "blossoming, buzzing confusion" and a marked reluctance to live the life of the skeptic. If one reflects on the limits and the tenuous nature of what we know about the world, the effect can be like peering over the edge into an ultimate abyss. But it does not have to be so scary, only a little humbling. It leads to a Socratic admission of how little we actually know and of how much we have to rely on myth in order to cope. And it demonstrates how it is impossible for us to hold up every statement, thought, and image to scientific scrutiny. There is simply too much world and not enough time. It is more comfortable, easier, and useful to live with our myths. Also, myth helps us to retain our sanity by giving our world structure and value and by helping us to avoid the skepticism that would make us look into that terrifying abyss of nothingness, of *nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada.*²⁸

Myths forge common bonds. Through the communication of collective myths, we create and reinforce a sense of community, of be-

ing in the same boat together. American, English, Scottish, French, Polish, German, Russian, or whatever: Each nationality is defined not merely by a common territory, language, and ancestry but by what anthropologist Joseph Campbell has called the "public dreams" unique to and shared by the people of a culture—dramatic visions of the past, present, and future that serve the dual purpose of uniting a people while setting them apart from others.²⁹ Think of what the myth of the Promised Land has meant to Israel.

Jacques Ellul argues that entire civilizations—a collection of separate national cultures—can be and are bound together through transcendent myths. Modern western civilization, he says, is sustained by the myths of work, progress, and happiness. The myth of work is that it is redeeming and necessary, a myth appearing in forms varying from the view that "idleness is the source of all vices" to the Marxist lauding of the virtues of the proletariat. Through work, inevitable progress emerges and people ensure continued improvement in their wealth and well-being. The payoff is happiness, a state where sacrifice and suffering are no longer necessary. For Ellul, bourgeois and communist alike are goaded by this trinity of myths that provides a common set of aspirations underpinning the capitalist–communist cleavage throughout the world.³⁰

Myths offer identities. Myths are social and collective in character, but from the viewpoint of each of us who holds them, they are what Joseph Campbell designates as self-induced beliefs. As we adopt myths, we not only make the world more comprehensible and share our created realities with others, but each of us creates a unique identity. Or, to think of it another way, we identify the role each of us plays in the drama that is the continuing myth. A Yankee fan identifies with the legend and lore of America's favorite pastime and the very special role—as far as the fan is concerned—of a particular club and its followers. Labeling and thinking of oneself as "voter," by the same token, yields a role in the mythology that surrounds elections—that is, that elections make a crucial difference in what governments do, that through participation we make our voices heard, that officials are made responsible and responsive to our will, and so on. In short, through myths, we take on deeply meaningful identities that satisfy a lingering desire to "be somebody."

Writing in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell

notes that the individual in his life's passage "is necessarily only a fraction and distortion of the total image" of a person. One is, says Campbell, "limited either as a male or as a female" at any given period of one's life as "child, youth, mature adult, or ancient"; and each of us is "specialized as craftsman, tradesman, servant, or thief, priest, leader, wife, nun, or harlot." A person cannot be all, notes Campbell. And again we share in the "body of the society as a whole," and therein the "totality" and the "fullness" of being a person is obtainable. Myths help to provide a sense of self, wholeness, and importance that cold, scientific, technological thought simply cannot supply.³¹

Myths help us get our way. Living as we do in a world where most of us want things but have limited resources to fulfill all of our desires, we often pursue our goals by trying to convince other people of their desirability, thus enlisting allies, assistance, and support. Persuading others to our cause involves what Kenneth Burke calls identification, an activity that involves myth and mythmaking. For Burke, identification means being "substantially one"—that is, when persons identify with one another they develop common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, and attitudes.³² Myths offer effective tools for establishing such identification. A speaker invoking a myth activates within his listeners feelings of kinship, emotional yearnings, dreamlike aspirations, and unexpressed longings. The stronger the identification, the greater the persuasive appeal, which may almost reach a state of hypnotic communion between a leader and his faithful followers. Such was the alleged persuasive appeal of Adolf Hitler, who never ceased to marshal a host of myths in his oratorical flights.

As a basis for persuasion, myth makes an emotive rather than a scientific use of language. I.A. Richards draws the distinction: In the scientific usage of language, a statement is used to refer to something demonstrably true or false; emotive usage is on behalf of the effects of words on emotions, feelings, anxieties, fears, aspirations, and hopes. Scientific usage results in specific references; emotive usage produces vague, but often deep-seated, attitudes.³³

In sum, because myths help people to comprehend the incomprehensible, commune with their fellows, and achieve self-esteem, they are especially useful as rhetorical devices that achieve what scientific thought cannot—an appeal to the "psycho" as well as "logical!"

roots of human existence. This appeal is particularly apparent when we observe the part myths play in political dramas.³⁴

YES, VIRGINIA, THERE ARE UNICORNS IN THE POLITICAL GARDEN

The task set at the beginning of this chapter of defining myth, discussing its characteristics, and speculating upon why people cling to myths is now completed. But we have said relatively little yet about political myths—their character, types, and origins. The remainder of this book is about that topic, but a few preliminary remarks are in order before looking in detail at political myths and their makers.

What Scholars Have Said About Political Myths

Political scientists have recognized that myth is important to the operation of political orders, and there have been sporadic attempts to develop the concept of myth for use in political inquiry. For instance, Robert MacIver begins his classic, *The Web of Government*, with the centrality of myth, or “the value-impregnated beliefs and notions that men hold, that they live by or live for. . . .” MacIver made as broad a claim for the importance of myth as we:

Every society is held together by a myth system, a complex of dominating thought-forms that determines and sustains all its activities. . . . Every civilization, every period, every nation, has its characteristic myth-complex. . . . The myth mediates between man and nature. From the shelter of his myth he perceives and experiences his world. Inside his myth he is at home in his world.³⁵

A more sustained treatment appears in Henry Tudor’s *Political Myth*. After a survey of some of the more familiar historical myths—the Roman Foundation myth, national revolutionary myths (the myth of the Norman Yoke in England), the myth of the Aryan race, the

myth of the Proletarian Revolution—he concludes by restricting myth to a tale that “tells the story of a political society”; a myth is “always a story, a narrative of events in dramatic form.”³⁶ Unfortunately this limits the concept of myth to only one type, what we will call “master myths.” Myth, we contend, is dramatic in form, but it is not always a narrative of events nor a story. Contemporary myths about the presidency (e.g., whether the office and its holder are strong or weak) or about political heroism do not necessarily involve a large-scale “story of a political society” but are, rather, a dramatic image specific to a political present and only tangentially related to the large-scale myths of the historical-political order.

Other recent works by social scientists have touched on the nature of political myth. Harold Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan define it as “the pattern of the basic political symbols current in a society . . . the political perspectives most firmly accepted. . . .”³⁷ George Woodcock describes political myth as “a projection into the past or, more often, the future of a mirage based on the desires of a section of the people, which is used to induce them to follow some political group or embrace some program under the illusion that they will attain what they have seen in the mirage.”³⁸ Political myth, says Murray Edelman, is “an unquestioned belief held in common by a large group of people that gives events and actions a particular meaning.”³⁹ Other definitions have stressed many of the same elements: Myth is a symbolic image of politics; major myths survive and function by being held by many people; they are often projections into the past or future, but in any case, they give meaning to the present; their reality is in the eye of the beholder.

Introducing the Unicorn to Politics

What scholars have said about political myth fits our view of myths as credible, dramatic representations of phenomena. What makes myths political is the subject matter. If religious myths deal with gods and their worship or cultural myths with the origins and hopes of a people, then political myths are about politics—the use of government by people to achieve order through the accommodation of social disputes. As with any myth, political myths are believed true because they help people to make sense of an unknowable and remote past, an imposing and

often contradictory present, and a yet-to-arrive future. Political myths derive and are told from the standpoint of the present; hence, as the circumstances in which people find themselves change, people reconstruct their myths about politics. Finally, as already noted, political myths have their uses, the principal one being that political leaders use myths to rally popular support.

Students of politics find it useful to distinguish myth from two related notions, ideology and utopia. Without splitting hairs, it suffices to say that ideologies, in contrast with myths, are generally more specific in reference to historical events, are cast in the form of logic rather than drama, purport to explain historical change rather than *the* past or *the* future, and, according to Mark Roelofs, are sets of ideas by which people actually organize for political action: "Ideology gives patterns for political action, . . . is the thought pattern of persons whose work must be done day by day," whereas "myth gives meaning to national existence and endeavor, . . . is the ancient memory and the generational hope of the whole people, its 'civil religion.'" "Utopias, in further contrast, are visions of a more perfect world to come. If myths deal solely with the future, they are not strictly myths, but utopias."⁴¹ As we shall see, however, myths often incorporate utopian visions in a dramatic account of past, present, and future.

Differing Types of Mythical Beasts in Politics

It will help in the discussion that follows to recognize that there are differing types of political myths. We consider four broad categories:

Master myths are broad, overarching myths that constitute the collective consciousness of an entire society. As in the case of Ellul's myths of work, progress, and happiness, some master myths transcend nations, economies, governments, and societies. In this book, however, we are concerned only with the master myths that feed the collective consciousness that is America as a state of mind. Three sets of such master myths are relevant: the *foundation* myth that tells the story of our nation's origins, its struggle for independence, and the framing of the Constitution; *sustaining myths*, which are myths enhancing the

maintenance of political relationships (such as those between church and state); and *eschatological myths* that project the nation's destiny on the basis of our past and present.

Myths of "Us and Them" are myths that set specific social collectivities apart from others in the nation. They may be about *institutions* (the myth of presidential power), *groups* (the "party of war" and "party of peace" myths about Democrats and Republicans or the myths of "haves" and "have nots"), or *movements* (such as the myths of populism or of progressivism).

Heroic myths surround the legendary figures of American politics, especially those included in the American pantheon housing Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln, but they also pertain to villains (Richard Nixon) and fools (Billy Carter).

Pseudo-myths are myths in the making. They are short-term myths formulated about contemporary politics and marketed to serve a variety of political ends. The presidential election of 1968 gave us the myth of "The New Nixon"; that of 1976 the myth of "The Outsider"; and a year of the Carter presidency brought the myth implied in the question, "Can Carter cope?" All were myths in the making that may or may not enter national political folklore in later generations.⁴²

LOOKING FORWARD The Centrality of Myth in American Politics

In the remainder of this book, we consider a host of American political myths and the people who make them. In the rest of Part One, we shall do two things: Chapter 2 examines reigning myths about America's political past, and Chapter 3 considers selected contemporary myths in American politics. In Part Two, we focus on who the mythmakers of America are and how they do it. In Chapter 4, our concern is with politicians and the people who promote them into public figures. Chapter 5 deals with the media of popular entertainment and how popular culture contributes to political mythmaking. Chapter 6 looks at public affairs reporting—by journalists and pollsters—as a key area of mythmaking. Chapter 7 examines another

set of actors, the social scientists who purport to explain rather than create political realities; much of what they do also turns out to be mythmaking. Our concluding chapter is an effort to look ahead to the possible mythology of America to come.

We hold no illusions that Americans will take kindly to having many of their most sacred beliefs about politics labeled mythical. Nor will many identified as mythmakers willingly admit to that appellation. Yet we feel that the argument is worth making. Our purpose respecting political myth is not to reduce every political idea, action, or event to myth but to take due note of where myths most certainly are important in our nation's politics. We both describe and explain, debunk and celebrate, criticize and marvel. And along the way, we may even add to the body of American political mythology. For there are in politics instances, as Paul Watzlawick says about life generally, "where everything is true, and so is its contrary."¹⁴

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CHAPTER

George, Sit Down, You're Rocking The Boat Myths Of America's Political Past