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Americans, coming from a revolutionary tradition, have had to invent or discover new national myths and legends. As we cast off our British past, we also severed ourselves from British cultural traditions. The American Revolution provided materials for new myths and legends: the Mayflower, Plymouth Rock, John Smith, and Pocahontas. In addition, several of the founding fathers were deified, especially George Washington, whose aura rivaled that of Zeus on Mount Olympus.

However, Washington was not always an entirely satisfactory folk-myth figure, since his perceived Olympian qualities made him a man who could be admired and worshipped from afar but was not really approachable. As historian Marcus Cunliffe has written, Washington in the nineteenth century was sometimes said to be one of the American wonders, the other two being Niagara Falls and the Brooklyn Bridge.

Americans were thus waiting for a folk-hero accessible to the common man and Abraham Lincoln admirably filled the bill. Born in a log cabin in humble circumstances, he rose to the highest office in the land, saved the Union, freed the slaves, and was struck down at the height of his success by the assassin, John Wilkes Booth. This is certainly the stuff of which legends are made.

Certainly no one would have attempted to compare Lincoln with Niagara Falls, and when his law partner, William Herndon, once told him how awed he had been by viewing that wonder of nature, Lincoln, who had also visited Niagara, supposedly replied, “The thing that struck me most forcibly... was, where in the world did all that water come from.” Herndon, who missed the humor of the statement, considered his colleague rather obtuse, but for most Americans this down to earth simplicity has made Lincoln an endearing figure. The sixteenth president was as approachable as the first president was remote, and the Americans embraced him eagerly.

Lincoln’s assassination also helped to transform him into a folk-hero. It is not absolutely necessary to die in office to be deified, but both Lincoln and John F. Kennedy became martyrs in this fashion. Up until the time of his death, Lincoln was actually one of our more controversial and unpopular presidents and Kennedy’s short time in office permitted him relatively few accomplishments.

Another similarity surrounding the deaths of both Lincoln and Kennedy is the belief that their murders were the result of a conspiracy engineered by members of their own administrations or government intelligence agencies. While many of these conspiracy views turn out to be the worst nonsense and easily dispelled, they have been persistent.

Whatever the merits of any individual conspiracy theories, their longevity can be tied to mythological patterns. The public finds it hard to conceive of a president being killed by a lone crackpot or small band of conspirators who have no larger purpose in life. There is something particularly unsatisfying about the idea that someone as powerful as the president can be assassinated for no other reason than the assassin’s warped individual psychology. There seems to be a desperate desire to believe that the assassins acted for a cause, which would give the president’s death some meaning.

It is also interesting that the public does not believe that the assassins really die. It has long been argued that John Wilkes Booth escaped Garrett’s barn, while someone else died in his place, or that there was an Oswald look-alike and that the “real” Oswald did not die in Dallas. In traditional mythology, the slayer of the folk-god could not die an easy death, but had to wander the world alone and
friendless. While Oswald’s remains were recently exhumed and positively identified, after a messy legal battle involving his brother and widow, this will probably not end the belief that there was an Oswald double any more than people will cease to believe that Booth survived Garrett’s barn.

Lincoln has sometimes been cast in contradictory roles. Since he was murdered on Good Friday, just when the triumph in the Civil War had been assured, religious comparisons became almost inevitable. As one commentator wrote, “Jesus Christ died for the world. Abraham Lincoln died for his country.” This sanitized and prettified Lincoln. A combination of both Washington and Christ, he became the demi-god whose career paralleled those of the heroes of classical mythology.

At the same time, however, another equally mythical Lincoln was portrayed — a western hero in the mold of Davy Crockett or Paul Bunyan. This Lincoln told jokes (many of which were risqué), was a shrewish wife who made his life a living hell. In fact, his one true love had been Anne Rutledge, who died at an early age, and Lincoln had never gotten over her death. Many of these portrayals are stereotypical devices often used in western humor.

Another powerful myth is that of Lincoln as a common man. Addressing the 166th Ohio Regiment, Lincoln said that his rise to the presidency showed that any mother’s son might aspire to that office. On other occasions he claimed that his policy was to have no policy, and gave the impression that he was carried along by events rather than directing them. One would get the impression from all of this that Lincoln drifted with the tide and that his career was due to chance and fortuitous circumstances.

In reality, Lincoln was one of the most ambitious individuals that his friends had ever seen. These friends, it might be added, were themselves usually politicians and men of considerable ambition, and they recognized in Lincoln a burning ambition to reach high status. As his law partner Herndon expressed it, “His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest.”

Abraham Lincoln was far from being a common man in other respects. His reputation as a joke cracking, stand-up comedian, has been exaggerated. His mature writings do not give the impression of a rustic spinning yarns around the stove at the country store, but rather of a man of strong intellect. In fact, it has been suggested that if he had not turned to politics, Lincoln might have had a career in the literary field.

As Lincoln’s transformation into a folk hero proceeded, questions were raised about his paternity. Since classical times, people have had difficulty believing that one born humbly could rise to great heights, and have speculated that the hero must have been sired by the gods or, at the least, someone a lot more heroic than the alleged biological father. Since Thomas Lincoln was usually portrayed as shiftless and illiterate and since Abraham and his father were not close in later years, rumors began to circulate that someone else was his father. Candidates ranged all the way from a neighbor, Abraham Enlow, to a Philadelphia Congressman’s claim that there was more than a passing resemblance between Abraham Lincoln and Henry Clay, which indicated a blood relationship.

Two other candidates were rumored to be John C. Calhoun or Patrick Henry. It would be a delightful historical paradox to believe that the genes of Calhoun, who was a state’s rights advocate and champion of slavery, also produced a man who was devoted to the Union and who ultimately destroyed the system of slavery. But the best trick of all is the idea that Lincoln could have been fathered by Patrick Henry who died in 1799, ten years before Lincoln was born.

As Lincoln became a mythic figure, such diverse groups as civil rights advocates, Ku Klux Klanners, pro-liquor forces, and anti-liquor forces all tried to show that he would have agreed with their positions. This was possible because Lincoln was a very secretive person, remaining an enigma to those who knew him best. One of his closest friends, Judge David Davis, referred to Lincoln as “the most secretive man I ever knew.” His style of leadership was what has come to be called in the case of Dwight Eisenhower, “The Hidden Handled Presidency.”

There are, indeed, many similarities. Eisenhower, who used to be portrayed as a golf-player who took long naps in the afternoon, is now seen as a strong chief executive who made policy and then, using the staff system he was familiar with from the army, passed the decisions to his subordinates to be carried out. Lincoln apparently acted in a very similar...
manner, directing events from behind the scenes, but thereby somewhat obscuring his policies and method of operation from later generations.

Another source of Lincoln mythology, interestingly enough, was Lincoln himself. As Richard Hofstadter has written, "The first author of the Lincoln legend and the greatest of the Lincoln dramatists was Lincoln..." Hofstadter argues that Lincoln, like many American politicians before and since, saw the value in the Horatio Alger story whereby poor boy rises from obscurity to fame, and that he skillfully exploited his log cabin origins throughout his career.

Historians have helped to perpetuate Lincoln mythology, often passing on many of these myths without really examining them. In addition, academic historians have been content to abandon many areas to the sensationalists and popularizers, who are more than willing to rush into the breach, with their shocking charges and revelations. Professional historians abandon any area at great peril to historical truth and, if they do, they should not complain when myths quickly arise, as occurred in the case of Lincoln's assassination.

One cannot help speculating about how Lincoln would have reacted to this later mythmaking, even if he personally helped to create some of the myths. Lincoln had a keen sense of his place in history. There is little evidence that he possessed a very strong belief in the immortality of the traditional Christian heaven and spiritual afterlife. Rather, Lincoln hoped to gain immortality in his achievements so that he would be remembered by his fellow men when he was gone. In 1841, he had confided to his friend Joshua Speed that he had "done nothing to make any human being remember that he had lived," but when he talked to Speed after the Emancipation Proclamation he told him, "I believe that in this measure my fondest hope will be realized." Historian Robert Bruce has argued convincingly that when he lay dead in the Peterson House in April, 1865, it was no accident that Edwin Stanton, with whom he was very close, did not speak of his character or his place in heaven, but said simply, "Now he belongs to the Ages."

Even though the real Lincoln was a somewhat different man from the mythical figure he has become, this does not mean we should entirely abandon myth. As University of Massachusetts Professor Stephen Oates concludes, myth carries a truth of its own, albeit different from so-called "historical truth." Myth reveals the way Americans wished Lincoln had been, even though it does not always reveal the way he was.

And, as another close student of myth, David Donald, has written, "It speaks well for Americans that to the central hero in their history, their folklore has attributed all the decent qualities of civilized men—patience, tolerance, humor, sympathy, kindliness, and sagacity." It is little wonder that despite all the myths, the "real Lincoln," who embodied the spirit of his age in both word and deed, and who guided the country successfully through one of its most perilous times, still maintains his standing with Americans as our number one chief executive.