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Getting America Wrong

by John Kyle Day

Myth America: Historians Take on the Biggest Legends and Lies About our Past, Kevin Kruse, Julian E. Zelizer, eds., Basic Books, 2023, pp. 400, $28.00 hardcover.

Kevin Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer continue the scholarly tradition of presentist historians who either condemn or justify their own era by using a polemical lens to view the past. In *Myth America,* Kruse and Zelizer assemble a coterie of American historians to continue what they see as the public debunking of American historical shibboleths, a process instantiated with the *New York Times*'s 1619 Project. In their introduction, Kruse and Zelizer solely blame our current "Age of Disinformation" on the malignant "political campaigns and presidency of Donald Trump." (6) For Kruse and Zelizer, the Donald is singularly responsible for both the Chinese-based Covid-19 pandemic and Capitol Hill riot on the Feast of Epiphany, January 6, 2021.

Accordingly, Kathleen Belew's essay, "Insurrection," portrays the latter as just the latest manifestation of violent white supremacist uprisings that began with the American Revolution, "a moment that both built upon and produced deep and enduring legacies of violence, racism, and settler colonialism." (239) Kruse and Zelizer argue that today's vitriolic public discourse is a result of conservative media bias which, "unlike the network news programs of the so-called mainstream media, which placed great emphasis on an even-handed approach that hewed to objective facts and eschewed editorializing," serves as a tocsin for white nationalist propaganda. (7) Social media, moreover, further funneled conservatives' tunnel vision into far-right groupthink.

In Kruse and Zelizer's Manichean view, contemporary hot-button debates in the culture war are merely a contest between disinterested, educated, and objective moral paragons like themselves on one side, with ignoramuses on the other. For instance, scholars that study the unintended negative consequences of the New Deal or the Great Society should be unequivocally condemned, their arguments unwor-

thy of formal academic consideration and debate. Eric Rauchway's essay thus describes scholarship that may reach such conclusions about the New Deal as "bullshit." (136) Similarly, Erika Lee's essay claims that all criticism of wide-open and unfettered illegal immigration is only "anti-immigrant xenophobia," a crude "part of systemic racism and discrimination in America," while she repeats the mendacity of Trump's inaccurately labelled "Muslim ban." (55)

While Karen Cox's essay "Confederate Monuments" summarizes the long-established scholarly consensus concerning the direct correlation between the Confederate monument building in *fin de siècle* South and the construction of the Jim Crow caste system, she does not acknowledge academe's willfully blind acquiescence (if not tacit support) to the vandalism and destruction of public art and historical artifacts by unruly mobs. For Kruse and Zelizer, those who may question statue toppling and want to preserve historical artifacts and public art remain stubbornly beholden to the Cult of the Lost Cause and entranced by the increasing sway of white supremacy in Republican politics. When a very few protest that America's current state of progressive hysterics is eerily reminiscent to Byzantine Iconoclasm and the Roman Papacy's farcical removal of genitalia from classical Italian statuary, Kruse and Zelizer believe these simpletons only parrot mindless flag-waving amateur historians who ply their trade in airport store paperbacks.

Glenda Gilmore's essay, "The Good Protest," is a case in point. Gilmore embraces the secular definition of the Civil Rights Movement (*circa* 1954-1965) and directly links the courageous, devout, and passivist civil rights workers with the contemporary Marxist revolutionary organization Black Lives Matter. By doing so, Gilmore both misconstrues and desecrates the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's theological worldview. Gilmore concludes her materialist *apologia* with praise for the national anthem kneeling led by the National Football League's third-string quarterback Colin Kaepernick. This demonstration was not only based on the false narrative of inordinate police brutality towards blacks, but also repudiated the contributions of patriotic black American veterans who fought and died for the United States in all of its conflicts.

Historical presentism pervades most of the included essays. Daniel Bell blames Republican Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Newt Gingrich (1995-1998) for injecting the term "American Exceptionalism" into the body politic. Bell never acknowledges that the term's sentiment is as old as America herself, promoted in the rhetoric of such diverse leaders as the Puritan John Winthrop, the journalist and publisher Henry Luce, and Presidents Abraham Lincoln, Herbert Hoover, and Ronald Reagan. According to Bell, Gingrich's progressive opponents are more acute in acknowledging the "harm it has done," in "the treatment of indigenous peoples, slavery, U.S. foreign policy in

the twentieth century, and contemporary inequality and racism." (24)

Sarah Churchwell's "America First," argues that when Republican U.S. Senator Warren G. Harding initially employed this slogan for his successful 1920 presidential campaign, it was not actually about articulating the American people's weary opposition to military adventurism abroad, the Great War's mass industrial-level murder, jingoistic Wilsonian Internationalism, the impotent League of Nations, global courts, and compromising the United States' constitutional sovereignty. It was really about "bigotry at home." Gazing into her proverbial crystal ball, Churchwell's séance sees American isolationists in the 1940 Election as composed solely of a "miscellany of extremists," who promoted "nativist, racist, xenophobic, eugenicist, and Christian Nationalist mythologies" that directly link them with today's knuckle dragging anthropoids of flyover country that make up Trump's MAGA base. (75)

The lies of omission are palpable in other essays too. Ari Kelman's "Vanishing Indians" depicts the clumsy campaign rhetoric of failed Republican Presidential Candidate Rick Santorum as indicative of the obtuseness of the American people. Not once does Kelman mention the historical fact of Old World disease as the critical factor in the demographic disaster that befell American Indian populations between the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492 and the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890. Similarly, Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Caraway's polemic against economists Frederich Hayek and Milton Friedman blame capitalism for most of today's societal ills. Oreskes and Caraway declare that the late twentieth century's free market reforms instigated a myth yet never explain what that myth is or offer any evidence to support it.

Most egregious is Elizabeth Hinton's "Police Violence," which asserts that both National Guard units and local police forces were largely responsible for initiating the burning and looting of cities during the George Floyd Riots of the Summer of 2020. Hinton repeats the dangerous urban myth that the National Park Service and the U.S. Secret Service used tear gas on nonviolent protesters gathered in Washington, D.C.'s Lafayette Square on June 1, 2020. The use of tear gas was actually instigated by local police (under the direction of the staunch Black Lives Matter ally, Mayor Muriel Bowser) next to the park to disperse vigilantes who blocked the installation of security fencing. Hinton fails to mention that just two nights prior, this very same group, acting in the grand tradition of a bloodthirsty southern lynch mob, used Lafayette Square as a staging ground in the coordinated assault against the White House while attempting to murder President Trump and his family.[1]

Likewise, Natalie Mehlman Petrzela's "Family Values Feminism" contends that historically, American feminists sought to "strengthen the family and offer policies that allow parents and their children to flourish in the face of

challenges presented by the marketplace, austerity policy, and restrictive ideas about gender." (244) Petrzela not only dismisses Margaret Sanger's racist eugenics, which was central to the development of the modern birth control movement, but she diminishes the profound influence of leading anti-family feminists Betty Friedan and Kate Millett, the two dominant theorists of feminism's second wave. Freidan consciously misconstrued her evidence to bolster her claims of middle-class women's marital unhappiness. Far from family friendly, Millett denounced the three M's (marriage, monogamy, and motherhood) as traps that made women the slaves of men.

Can Petrzela's argument that American feminism has always and continues to pursue traditional family values square with present day feminists' support of abortion as a legitimate form of birth control? Other than the happenstance of biology, do today's feminists—who in just one generation devolved their mantra from "safe, legal, and rare," to "shout your abortion!" and support biological men in women's sports and locker rooms—really have anything in common with devout Christians like Susan B. Anthony, Isabella Baumfree (aka Sojourner Truth), and Lucretia Mott?

Kruse's own contribution, "The Southern Strategy," combined with Lawrence B. Glickman's "White Backlash," never explicitly define modern American conservatism and how it relates to the United States' historical litmus test issue of race. Kruse, for instance, notes that Republican Presidential Candidate Barry Goldwater of Arizona opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, but never bothers to scrutinize what the Republican party actually supported during the classical Civil Rights Movement. Here, the topic that needs more research is the current myth that the South's great switch from the Democrats to the GOP was largely based on the region's Thermidorian reaction to the Second Reconstruction, popularly known as "Massive Resistance" (to Jim Crow).

That the Republicans formally endorsed both *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and other Federal civil rights legislation in successive party platforms is not mentioned. Of the four civil rights acts passed between 1957 and 1968, Republicans in both chambers of Congress voted in favor at a higher rate than Democrats in all but one case. While the overwhelmingly Democratic Southern Congressional Delegation largely directed opposition to Federally mandated desegregation, successful Democratic Presidential Candidates Lyndon Baines Johnson and James Earl Carter both won solid majorities in the states of the former Confederacy as forthright champions of black civil rights.

Even Baby Boomer Bill Clinton of Arkansas competed for a large share of votes from the former Confederacy, outright winning the border states in both 1992 (against two fellow southerners George H.W. Bush and Ross Perot of Texas) and 1996, against both Perot

and the Jayhawk Republican, U.S. Senator Robert Dole of Kansas. Why did the former States of the Confederacy (with notable exceptions such as Arkansas, which remained staunchly Democratic until 2014), not go thoroughly Republican until Gingrich's 1994 Contract with America, thirty years after the Jim Crow caste system was destroyed and prior to the seismic demographic and economic transformation obliterated any remaining vestige of Southern exceptionalism?

There are some good essays in this book. Daniel Immerwohr's "The United States is an Empire," is a clearly written historical summary of American foreign policy from the academic perspective of the New Left. Zelizer's own "Reagan Revolution" is a measured summation of the limits of modern Republican electoral success. Other than mistakenly blaming "conservatives" for opposing the creation of a Federal Holiday honoring Dr. King (President Ronald Reagan signed it into law), the venerated historian Michael Kazin's sympathetic history of American socialism is excellent.

Likewise, Joshua Zeitz's "The Great Society" makes a persuasive case for this last successful manifestation of modern American liberalism. Most compelling is Akhil Reed Amar's "Founding Myths," which convincingly places George Washington at the center of the writing and ratification of the U.S. Constitution, the very first precedent for the establishment of popular sovereignty in recorded history. Scholars who remember the exact moment that they were first stirred out of their undergraduate student desks while reading James Madison's *Federalist No. 10* will be sorely disappointed to learn that this vaunted treatise was of little significance to the ratification debates of 1787-1788. Madison's essay only received scholarly attention and became the gold standard text on college campuses after the early twentieth century when historian Charles Beard published his influential but largely discredited *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* in 1913. Nevertheless, Amar's argument that the Founders did not distinguish between republican and democratic forms of government is soporific. The Founders were more immersed in classical history and literature than both everyday Americans and their supposed academic betters. The Founders surely differentiated between radical Athenian democracy and the Roman Republic. With just a cursory reading of the U.S. Constitution, a typical undergraduate student can comprehend its republican nature, with its emphasis on representative government, well insulated from capricious popular passion and whimsical innovation that has been seriously whittled down ever since the Progressive Era.

Despite these noteworthy exceptions, many of the American historians included in this anthology suffer from what Roger Scruton identified over thirty years ago as *oikophobia*, or "hatred of home."[2] The nasty tone set by Kruse and Zelizer belies a deep-seated anxiety about the current state of the historical profession. Surely, many of these his-

torians know that when they refuse to engage with or even consider conservative scholars and their ideas—let alone hire them or allow them to matriculate in their graduate programs—they are hypocritical at best, intellectually dishonest at worst.

Should we consider *Myth America* the death rattle of pursued objectivity in the American Historical profession? No. That Rubicon was likely crossed a generation ago. The imposition of absolute ideological conformity upon history departments across the United States may, however, have backfired spectacularly. Large numbers of Americans now question whether their children would benefit from a liberal arts education, realizing perhaps that the emperor may finally have no clothes. Indeed, much of *Myth America* evokes a bitterly cynical view towards both our nation's past and her people's future capacity for goodness. Let's hope that they are wrong.

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1. Martin Austermuhle, "Report: D.C. Police Responsible for Tear Gas Use During Lafayette Park Clearing," National Public Radio (WAMU 88.5), June 10, 2020 (accessed May 22, 2024, 9:27 A.M.); Elizabeth Weibel, "Fact Check: Biden Campaign Repeats Lie that Trump Tear-Gassed Protesters to Clear Park for Bible Phot-Op," *Breitbart News*, June 2, 2024.
2. Roger Scruton, "Oikophobia," *The Journal of Education* 175, no. 2, *Education and the American Advancement of Ethics and Character* (1993): 93-98.