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 HUFF
POST POLITICS

Myth and Its Dangers

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Myths play a central role as metaphor in many world religions, according to Joseph Campbell. In *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* and *The Power of Myth* he studied the world mythologies, found common themes in a wide variety of cultures, and reached a startling conclusion: myths, he said, come from dreams and, therefore, people around the world have common dreams. It is a profound and still controversial insight for religion, psychology, and human culture. Students in all these fields continue to consider the power of myth.

Myths in politics, however, play a much different role. "Widely held but false idea" is one dictionary definition of myth in common usage. For reasons that are still unclear, myths abound in recent American political history. Perhaps the most glaring and consequential was the myth that Iraq under Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction.

There are other cases in point. Barack Obama is a Muslim born in Kenya and therefore not an American citizen. These are myths, yet they are widely believed in certain circles. Poor people are poor by choice. A classic myth. A rising tide lifts all boats. Much more true when we were an industrial society and manufacturing products created jobs. Much less true when the economic tide is one of finance and money manipulation which lifts the gilded yachts but not the rowboats of the rest of us. Jobs are not created when crackpot financial schemes make hedge fund managers rich. Thus, a myth.

Myths in politics are dangerous. In an important speech at Yale University during the Cold War, John Kennedy said:

"For the great enemy of 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 forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought."
He was speaking of the myths on both sides that perpetuated a Cold War in a dangerous way.

Exactly 50 years later, no assessment comes closer to describing much of our current political world. Reason and facts are sacrificed to opinion and myth. Demonstrable falsehoods are circulated and recycled as fact. Narrow minded opinion refuses to be subjected to thought and analysis. Too many now subject events to a prefabricated set of interpretations, usually provided by a biased media source. The myth is more comfortable than the often difficult search for truth.

If this strange world were the product of mere laziness it might be understandable. But today's political myths are more perverse. They are a conscious hiding place from a changing, challenging, and often uncomfortable new world. Globalization, immigration, cultural and racial diversity are threatening and frightening to many who wish to freeze the former comfortable world in time and prevent any change.

Myths which have no basis in truth, or which do not operate as metaphors for religious truth, eventually fade away with the passing of those who perpetuate them and in the face of reality and fact. But the most dangerous myths create demons where none exist, the demons being anyone who disagrees with the myth-makers. In the meantime, however, they serve not only to delude the deniers but to frustrate our Founders' belief in the progress of the human mind.

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