

A Critique and a Defense of Mythologizing the Past

Was Abraham Lincoln really a moral leader who saved the United States and ended slavery? Did George Washington really save the Continental Army and win the American revolution? Was Thomas Jefferson really a forward-thinking liberalizer?

Alluring Myth vs. Disappointing Fact

The stories of men like these are quintessential examples of how many people mythologize the past. Many of the historical characters, stories, and happenings we learn in popular culture are similar: simplified, idealized, and moralized to convince us of our congenital greatness or persuade us to some perceived virtue.

But as with many core “events” of our American past, a study of real history tells us things are a bit more complicated than what our favorite histories convey. Lincoln suspended many civil rights of his own people and supported slavery-protective plans like the Crittendon Compromise. Jefferson had sex with (which amounts to “raped”) his slaves. Washington was widely criticized for his conduct as a general and took questionably British actions as president (including armed suppression of tax resistance – sound familiar?)

At worst, mythologization can have tremendous destructive impact. When people begin to believe myths about their people’s great collective past, for instance, they might end up with something like Nazi Germany or imperial Britain/America/Japan, etc.. But on most days, mythologization just creates distorted images of real people and real events that can have more subtle consequences on thinking about policy and political philosophy. Because Franklin Delano Roosevelt is mythologized as the man who led the US out of the Great Depression (highly questionable), many people still adopt and use Keynesian economic policy in times of economic downturn.

A Brief Defense of Mythologizing the Past

So far, mythologization doesn’t have a whole lot going for it. But I do think there is room for mythology – albeit of a limited form. For all our faults as humans, if we cannot look back on our predecessors and see some actions or persons worth emulating, we’re hopelessly screwed. We need to know that virtue is not just a floating concept but something someone has actually done.

Done right, mythologization is an artful way to highlight and bring into focus the *actual* heroic actions of people from the past. It consciously sets out to show us not “everything that happened” but “something that happened that matters.” That something shows us how to act in the here and now.

Consider the famous HBO show *Band of Brothers*. It is a selective, mythologized retelling, with heroic music in the background and a Hollywood budget to make it look good. It is no propaganda piece – it's honest about the horrors the men of the 101st Airborne faced and the horrors they inflicted in World War 2. But the story itself is also primarily concerned with the heroism of many of EZ Company's members. And much of it is set to heroic music for extra effect.

But if we can't learn the exact history of Operation Overlord or Operation Market Garden from these men or from their mythologization in *Band of Brothers*, we can learn how to be bold and disciplined and brave and loyal to comrades and faithful to a mission. That to me makes mythologization worth it in any case. **What effect does the mythologization have?** Does it mislead people about cause and effect? It might be harmful. Does it encourage people to new levels of self-leadership? It might be good.

Yes, even the actions of men like Washington, Lincoln, and Jefferson can teach us, and should (I loved the recent movie *Lincoln* despite my qualms with Lincoln). To let their faults ruin the perfectly good stories of their goodness would be a waste. There is a room for both iconoclasm and mythologization in history. In fact, as history is so full of complexity, it may be necessary to have a dialogue between both in order to have an accurate and useful view into the past.