

Does the Myth of the Frontier still form an essential part of American identity and is it used as a political justification in the present day?

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Abstract

The role of the Frontier Myth in American identity has been shown by its continuous reference in Presidential speeches throughout history. Several distinguished historians have written about the role of the Frontier Myth in the shaping of the politics and identity of the American nation. What few have investigated is whether the Myth still maintains its influential role today. The essay investigates whether the Frontier Myth holds true to its status as the oldest and most characteristic myth of US identity by identifying its classical themes and looking for them in the speeches of three relatively contemporary presidents. The purpose of the essay is to see whether the influence, function and political use of the Myth has changed. The results showed that the Frontier Myth has continued to play an influential role as a fundamental component of American identity and politics, but that the discourse surrounding the Myth and its political use has started to alter. The classical symbols of the Myth have been put in new contexts and combined with contemporary symbols of the American nation.

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1. Introduction

The United States protrudes as one of the nations in the world with the strongest character and identity. Its mass popular culture is so influential that it stretches beyond its borders to influence the one's of other nations, and it plays a dominant role as a superpower in the political arena. What interested me in pursuing my essay question was the belief-system underpinning the US identity that it is exceptional to other nations: the unswerving American conviction of the greatness and moral goodness of the nation as a liberal and democratic example for the rest of the world to follow.

The key to understanding the origin of this self-perceived exceptionalism was to look at the myths surrounding the identity of the American nation. The Myth of the Frontier has been regarded as the oldest and most representative myth of the American nation by several authors, Frederick Jackson Turner being one of the first by outlining the principles of the Myth in his "Frontier Thesis" in the 1890s. Since then, several authors interested in the field of American identity have built upon Turner's arguments, the recurring theme being that the Frontier Myth has been used by American presidents for varying political purposes throughout time. But does the Myth of the Frontier still exist today, and does it remain an essential part of the American identity? These were the questions that spiked my interest and led me to pursue my essay question.

1.1 Formulation of the issue, purpose and question formulations

The issue of interest is to investigate whether the Myth of the Frontier maintains its status as the American myth that prevails throughout time. Establishing this is central to my essay; if the myth is still alive, looking at how it is presented, its functionality and the discourse surrounding it are the next relevant issues to investigate – is the Myth important?

To outline the Myth and its central aspects, the investigation will initially draw upon the foundations laid out by distinguished authors within the field. After the Myth and its components have been understood, I will however test the Myth against *new empirical material* to see if it prevails in the present day. The notion of "present" will be

understood as the late 1980s to the present year. The reason for this is that previous historians, Richard Slotkin being one of the most distinguished, have investigated the Myth and its use by presidents ranging from the early 20th century to the 1980s. Testing the Myth against “new empirics” therefore means that I will begin where Slotkin ended – searching for the Myth in the speeches of George H. W. Bush (1989-1993), George W. Bush (2001-2009) and the current President, Barack Obama (2009-present day).

Choosing to begin my analysis of the Myth’s existence with George H. W. Bush was because the beginning of his presidency occurred in a significant period of change for the United States; The Cold War had come to an end, and the US was facing a choice regarding the path it wanted to pursue in its foreign politics. Bush Sr. referred to this period of time by his speech of a “New World Order” in 1991.¹ I therefore chose this as my starting point to investigate whether the Frontier Myth prevailed after this significant period of change in US policies.

I will watch and analyse the political speeches made by Bush Sr., Bush and Obama to see if the Myth and the classical themes it contains are mentioned, and if so, if the discourse surrounding the Myth remains the same or if it has altered. I will only look at State of the Unions delivered by the presidents. The reason for this is that these usually entail a general appraisal of the US nation and links to its identity, the chosen “approach” of the elected President in his rule, and finally the political motives and aims for the nation.

In order to answer my essay question, I have formulated a set of question formulations to be answered throughout the investigation to help me obtain my purpose with the essay. These are as follows: What language and value-loaded terms are used in connotation with the Frontier Myth? Does the mention of the Myth draw upon classical symbols and metaphors surrounding it? What purpose/effect do the myths serve or are meant to serve

¹The Pennsylvania State University, *State of the Union Addresses by United States Presidents: State of the Union Addresses by George H. W. Bush*, 2003, <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/poldocs/uspressu/SUaddressGHWBush.pdf>, accessed on 8th of January 2014

to enhance the American identity? Is there a consistency or pattern of value-loaded terms that are brought up in relation to the Myth?

1.2 Material and limitations

There were different types of speeches that I could have chosen to focus on when analysing the presidential speeches: presidential acceptance speeches, speeches declaring war and intervention as well as speeches directed to the General Assembly. My choice to focus on solely State of the Unions was because these contained the most comprising information on the political aims, domestic and foreign tensions as well as the themes of the administrations of each President. Given a wider time frame, a combination of speeches would have been focused on to investigate whether the Presidents spoke of the Myth differently depending on the context.

2. The Myth

In this chapter, I will explain the general term ‘Mythology’ and its origin, and present an in-depth understanding of The Myth of the Frontier. As previously mentioned, I have read about the established arguments and genres of the Frontier Myth by previous authors and historians. Throughout my research of the Myth, I noticed that there were certain terms and themes discussed in relation to the Myth that were brought up by most of the historians. The most frequent themes were the notions of heroism, individualism and violence. This led me to establish the notions as ‘sub-myths’ under the greater Myth of the Frontier; they are less comprising myths about the American identity that form part of the Frontier Myth.

The understanding of the Frontier Myth as constituted by three constituent sub-myths will therefore form the theoretical perspective of my essay. The concept of nationalism is however also important in the shaping of myths; the myths of the American identity originate in a strong sense of nationalism, and are presumably administrated to allude to the nationalistic feelings amongst the citizens of the United States. I have therefore chosen to incorporate one definition of territorial nationalism into my theoretical

perspective. The definition derives from the *Encyclopaedia of Nationalism* and describes territorial nationalism to be constituted by four criteria: “a historic territory, legal-political unity, fraternal citizenship and mass civic culture.”² These are all more or less consistent with the construction and application of mythologies, but the aspect of territorial nationalism that will be focused is the existence of a mass civic culture, as it is closest related to the construction of myths. Including all four criteria would result in a shift of focus from Mythology to Nationalism – and though nationalism is undoubtedly important in my essay, it’s the concept of Mythology that I wish to investigate.

The meaning of a mass civic culture is the existence of a mass popular culture that holds the common values, ideologies, traditions and ideals of a nation.³ The citizens of a nation obtain a strong sense of belonging to their nation through the relation to common values forming part of the identity or “core” of the nation. Myths work in similar ways, as they amongst other things serve as cultural productions of mass media to be relatable by the citizens of the American nation.⁴ In this sense, myths and a sense of territorial nationalism are both products and constituents of culture, being continuously reinforced by mass media and other societal institutions. Again, this demonstrates that myths and the concept of nationalism are the carriers of history and culture combined – and are actively applied to evoke collective memories and sentiments of the citizens of a state.

Investigating the Frontier Myth with this perspective meant that I could more easily answer my formulated issue, purpose and question formulations. This theory provides a thorough understanding of mythology and the Frontier Myth; what it symbolizes, where it originates and what the intended effects could be of making such an allusion to the American people. An in-depth understanding of the concept of Myth is necessary in order to properly analyse the use of the Frontier Myth in Presidential speeches and State of the Unions.

² Leoussi S. Athena, *Encyclopaedia of Nationalism*, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey, 2001, p.63

³ Ibid., p.62

⁴ Slotkin, Richard, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, 1992, p.9

I chose material that explained, questioned and analysed the role of the Frontier Myth throughout history as a result of my theory but also in its creation. My primary material had to be something that simultaneously reflected the strong feelings of nationalism in the USA as well as the discourse about myths and their role in politics. This is why I decided to choose presidential speeches as my primary material, with my predominant focus on State of the Unions; they are annual summaries of the conditions of the state, addressed to the Congress but released for all the citizens of the nation to watch, whose discourse is influenced by the legislative agenda of the current president and his administration as well as the active application of myths about the US identity to gain the support from the Congress and the American people. My theoretical perspective leads me to select secondary material that explains the discourses surrounding nationalism, American identity, mythology and the Myth of the Frontier and their role in American society.

Choosing my established definition of the Frontier Myth was however not the only relevant perspective for my investigation. Seeing as a lot of the myths about the American identity revolve around masculinity and connote it with themes like heroism and violence,⁵ a feministic perspective would also have been relevant and incredibly interesting to undertake in my essay. Undertaking this perspective was also made impossible by the limited timeframe provided to carry out the investigation.

The division of the Frontier Myth into ‘sub-myths’ is, as has been mentioned, the perspective of the Myth that will be maintained when analysing my primary material. It however also forms the method for my investigation. When listening to or reading about the speeches of the selected Presidents, I will search for the mention of the respective sub-myths within the context of the Frontier Myth. The Myth might however be presented in a different form today than it was a century ago; mentions of symbolic terms in relation to the Myth like ‘cowboy,’ ‘The Wild West’ and ‘civilization/savages’ might be frowned upon or seen as out-dated in relation to the outlook of society from the late

⁵ Orford, Anne, *Muscular Humanitarianism: Reading the Narratives of the New Interventionism*, European Journal of International Law, Vol 10 No.4, 1999, p.688

1980s until today. Other value-loaded terms might be used in their place, symbolizing the same aspects of the Myth but placed in a contemporary context; the rugged cowboy of the past might take a different form today, but nonetheless representing the same values characteristic of American identity. I will therefore not only look at the explicit mention of terms that are typical and characteristic of the Frontier Myth, but carry out a text analysis where I try to trace the value-loaded words mentioned in relation to it. These value-loaded words mentioned in relation to the Myth will be collectively named as code words. The Myth is a language of power. Therefore, analysing what code words are mentioned in relation to the Myth, how they are presented and what is implied or suggested when talking about the Myth can be regarded as a form of discourse analysis.

The following sub-chapters therefore contain my constructed theory and method: beginning with a general presentation of Mythology and its background followed by a thorough explanation of the Myth of the Frontier and its sub-myths.

2.1 Mythology – an overview

In this section I will provide relevant background information about mythology, as well as its role in society and in the creation of a nation's identity. There are several myths about the US nation, but to allow for a more in-depth analysis of the myths' role and function in political speeches, I will only examine one of them in this essay. The chosen myth is one of the oldest and most characteristic myths about the US nation⁶: The Myth of the Frontier (see 2.2 for further information).

Richard Slotkin defines mythology as “stories drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness.”⁷ Myths consequently function as story-like notions that derive from historical events but have been embellished with metaphors and symbolism throughout time. This means that they to some extent represent actual historical incidents, but have been lifted from their historical root by the addition

⁶ Slotkin, 1992, p.10

⁷ Ibid., p.5

figurative language. Because of their recurrence through history, they become representative of a nation's identity and image; the ideologies of a nation's society are given meaning by the symbolic language of the myth.

Slotkin argues that the folkloristic manner in which myths have been retold instills a personal and social "remembering" in the citizens of a nation regardless of time.⁸ Myths consequently function as symbols of a society's history and culture, relatable by the people of a nation through their common genres and in the sentiments they invoke. Myths are therefore constant allusions to American history; when a new event happens, metaphors are used to interpret the experience by linking it to past historical events - the new event becoming the recurrence of the old.

Paradoxically, myths function both as the products and creators of culture. Myths are reproduced by mass media, in literary works such as newspapers and books as well as educational components in schools.⁹ Myths are thus constantly reproduced and echoed by discourses using symbolic and metaphorical language to describe them. As a result, they form a part of a society's culture that appeal to the concerns of the widest possible audience.

Because of the qualities mentioned above, myths form the perfect political mechanisms to explain the ongoing crises of a nation. The oldest and most important myths are the ones that revolve around problems that have persisted in a nation for a long period of time.¹⁰ Their wide appeal to the citizens of a nation makes them political tools functioning as unifying symbols to placate the American people, and to provide justification of political action in foreign and domestic affairs. The political use of myths is what will be looked for in presidential speeches, but will firstly be explained more specifically in the chapter concerning the Myth of the Frontier (2.2).

⁸ Slotkin, 1992, p.6

⁹ Ibid., p.9

¹⁰ Ibid., p.6

2.2 The Myth of the Frontier

The Myth of the Frontier is the oldest myth in American history, ranging back three centuries.¹¹ This has made it a frequent subject of political use throughout time and one of the most characteristic myths about the American identity. The Frontier myth is fundamentally about the process of separation: the creation of a unanimous, civilized “we” existing within the border and a common savage enemy on the other side of it to be defeated. The myth also entails a process of regression,¹² where an individual retreats to a former, more primal and “natural” state in order to be able to conquer the even more primal wilderness and savagery of new territories.

The myth originates in the subjugation of the “savage” Native Americans that originally inhabited America and the conquest of the wilderness that existed there previous to the “settlers” arrival.¹³ This process of civilizing savages and conquering the wild is believed to be the original cause of the national identity, economic prosperity and the “dynamic and ‘progressive’ civilization”¹⁴ that is the United States today. The essence of the myth is thus the idea of constantly moving to civilize and conquer a new “wilderness” to allow for the nation to prosper. In the colonial period, this was shown by the expansion of American colonies throughout the world, which grew in conjunction with the idea of American exceptionalism. In more present terms, I will regard the myth as a tool that refers to the American exceptionalism of the past and not as a means to colonize, but to ‘civilize’ a different kind of wilderness – a wilderness believed to demand the intervention of the superior US nation.

Frederick Jackson Turner outlined the principles of the myth in his “Frontier Thesis” in the late 19th century. According to Turner, the Frontier myth symbolized the dramatic

¹¹ Slotkin, p.10

¹² Ibid., p.11

¹³ Ibid., p.10

¹⁴ Ibid., p.10

struggle between “savagery and civilization.”¹⁵ The myth is at its base divided between two different borders, that of wilderness/civilization and the Indian/White border.¹⁶ The myth therefore entails the symbolic portrayal of an outsider or enemy that is to be collectively fought, conquered, or civilized.

2.2.1 The myth of individualism

According to Turner, the violent “conditions” of the Frontier taught the early Americans to become self-sufficient and adaptable to change – as the early pioneers of America were forced to “either adapt or perish.”¹⁷ The idea of rugged individualism is therefore one of the central components of the Frontier Myth, and a value that the ideal American possesses. The independent, hard working American springs from the self-sufficient agrarian worker from the past and is still an essential part of the American identity today. The Jefferson administration of the 19th century outlined the concept of individualism: “The virtuous citizen must, like the virtuous nation itself, be independent, self-reliant (...) administering one’s own freedom.”¹⁸ The belief that the prosperity, or ‘moral goodness’ of the nation came from the hard work of individuals that were *in charge of their own freedom* was hence set forth as one of the pillars of American identity in the beginning of the 19th century. The myth of the self-reliant, “taking care of his own business” American is a reflection of the individualism of ‘The West’ itself: Historian Richard White argues that the West’s “individualism, (...) self-reliance, (...) justice and ability to settle its own problems – is equally iconic.”¹⁹

2.2.2 The myth of violence

The notions of violence and rugged individualism are strongly connected in the Frontier Myth, and are both embedded in American identity. The symbol of the cowboy as the

¹⁵ Redding, A., *Frontier Mythographies: Savagery and Civilization in Frederick Jackson Turner and John Ford*, Salisbury State University, Salisbury, 2007, P.230

¹⁶ Slotkin, 1992, p.14

¹⁷ Redding, 2007, P.312

¹⁸ Ibid., P.314

¹⁹ Slatta, Richard W., *Making and unmaking myths of the American frontier*, North Carolina State University, North Carolina, 2010, p.84

violent, self-sufficient hero in American popular culture and history is a classic example of this argument. The mythification of the cowboy as well as the violence constituted by the Frontier have conventionalized perceptions of individualism and violence to become valued and necessary qualities in the average American today; the ownership of a gun is common and can be traced back to the rugged self-reliance of the cowboy. Conflict is one of the central themes of the Frontier Myth, as it revolves around the struggle to defeat the savages of a wilderness attempted to be conquered and civilized. The “savage war” therefore became the means for American expansion and the operative category for military doctrine;²⁰ progress of the nation was obtained through violence.

Most importantly, the myth of violence uses symbolism to depict the “savage” or “the Other” as the cause of the domestic tensions within a nation, and the sole obstacle to the creation of a perfect republic.²¹ The symbolic projection of the savage ‘Other’ as the culprit for the conflicts within the nation, or as the provocateur of war, legitimizes intervention and use of violence by the US to “solve” the problem. This hegemonic portrayal to justify intervention/colonization has been continuous throughout history to the present day; the USA still takes upon itself the “responsibility” to settle what it deems as unprovoked disputes in foreign nations. Slotkin argues the important point that it is not the amount of violence in American history that characterizes it, but the “mythic significance” it has provided the use of violence to later be put to political use. As Mark Anderson describes: “the frontier demands violence, supplies it, rewards it, and then projects it on to the Other.”²²

2.2.3 The myth of heroism

Slotkin argues that the mythification of history results in the compressing and simplification of historical and social experiences into the “action of representative individuals or ‘heroes.’”²³ As mentioned under 4.2.2 “The myth of violence”, the

²⁰ Slotkin, 1992, p.12

²¹ Ibid., p.13

²² Anderson, Cronlund Mark, *The U.S. frontier myth, American identity and 9/11*, 2011, p.320

²³ Slotkin, 1992, p.13

cowboy represents one of those heroes, symbolizing rugged individualism and violence through his “heroic” actions. Of importance to mention is that the problem lies not in the actual historical events, but in the cultural discourse that later surrounds it and the myth-making that occurs. This means that domestic conflicts, wars and the process of colonization are embedded with symbolic and metaphorical language to portray the US nation with heroic qualities – and in the creating of the antagonist ‘Other’ as the savage enemy.

Anne Orford speaks about the effects of the symbolic and cultural representation of the ‘White male hero’ in justifying military interventions. She argues that the concept of military intervention is a cultural product deriving from the discourse of media, politics, history and literature; implying that individuals are products of cultural and ideological representations, rather than the other way around.²⁴ The continuous cultural juxtaposition (especially in American Western films) of the superior, heroic white male with the inferior woman or black man instills the idea in the spectator that the object (the woman and the black male/female) is an inferior character that needs to be saved or punished by the white male hero.²⁵ The creation of this relationship serves to justify military interventions because it continuously reproduces an idea of superiority deriving from the white male authority of the West that needs to “help” the inferior, uncivilized citizens elsewhere. It creates a *desire* to carry out military interventions as the spectators of these narratives are made to identify with the portrayed hero rather than the passive object that is the woman or the black male/female.

The myth of heroism within the Myth of the Frontier consequently functions to personalize the American society’s response to an event to match the values and morals of the hero. The effect is that the political action taken by the US nation becomes a personalized heroic symbol that the American citizens want to identify with, idolizing military action and even deeming it as a necessary “job” by the heroic American government to carry out. Investigating the political use of this vital part of the Frontier

²⁴Slotkin,1992, p.684

²⁵ Ibid., p.688

Myth will be done by listening to and reading presidential speeches in chapter 4 of my investigation.

3. Presidential speeches and State of the Unions

In the following chapter, the existence of the Myth of the Frontier and each sub-myth will be looked for in the presidential speeches of George H. W. Bush, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. The chapter will be organized chronologically in terms of presidential order and then thematically in terms of the presentation of the Frontier Myth; each part will begin by writing about the general mention of the Frontier Myth in the speech and then continue to present its sub-myths under a combined heading. Each chapter will conclude with a “Conclusive analysis” to summarize the most important points in relation to the Myth.

3.1 George H. W. Bush (1989-1993)

3.1.1 The Myth of the Frontier

In the State of the Unions of 1990 and 1991, Bush speaks about the entering of the US into a ‘new era’²⁶ and comments upon the new directions he sees the American nation taking. The American nation is described not as a fixed concept, but as an ever-changing, ever adaptable “idea alive in the minds of the people.”²⁷ The constant repetition of the ‘new world’ that Bush states is represented by America can be regarded as a metaphor of a New Frontier similar to that of Kennedy’s speech in 1960.²⁸ This is done by alluding to a ‘new horizon’ and to the meeting of the challenges encompassed by the 90s. The connection to the Frontier Myth becomes clearer as Bush alludes to the origin of the Myth, by stating that “Our nation is the enduring dream of every immigrant who ever set foot on these shores.”²⁹ This statement recalls memories about the creation of the

²⁶ The Pennsylvania State University [*State of the Union Address January 31, 1990*], 2003, p.3, <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/poldocs/uspressu/SUaddressGHWBush.pdf>, accessed 8th of January 2014

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Slotkin, 1992, p.4

²⁹ The Pennsylvania State University, 2003, p.3

American nation; it was the European immigrants that first arrived to America and by the conquering of the savages that resided there obtained the foundations of the ‘enduring dream’ that is described to be America in the speech. Following this statement by “(...) and the millions still struggling to be free” alludes to the deep-rooted need of freedom from oppression and connects it to doing so by the use of violence.

The Frontier Myth is directly connected to in the State of the Union of 1992, where the idea of needing to conquer the savagery and wilderness of other nations is brought up in relation to Saddam Hussein. Bush describes him as follows: his “unprovoked invasion – his ruthless, systematic rape of a peaceful neighbour – violated everything the community of nations holds dear.”³⁰ He then continues to make a direct comparison of Saddam Hussein to the savage depicted by the Myth by saying “Tonight, we work to achieve another victory, a victory over tyranny and savage aggression.”³¹

3.1.2 The myth of heroism, individualism and violence

Freedom becomes an idolized symbol in the speech, represented as the ‘single shining principle’ and its cause underlying the American policy of ‘today, tomorrow and into the next century.’ The ‘cause of freedom’ is, however, not a new concept established during the speech, but a different wording of justifying US intervention in countries suffering from oppression and ‘lack of freedom.’ This idea is supported in the beginning of the speech, where Bush talks about the successes of the US military intervention in Panama. The US is indirectly represented as heroic by freeing Panama from living “in fear under the thumb of a dictator” and relating this success to the ‘brave’ American soldiers. The metaphor for the authoritarian rule of Panama connotes it with notions of suppression, restriction and fear. By presenting the US in opposition to this, Bush effectively portrays the previous authoritarian rule in Panama as the antagonistic ‘Other’ that demands intervention from the US, which is portrayed as the direct opposite by using terms like ‘freedom’ and ‘bravery.’

³⁰ The Pennsylvania State University [*State of the Union Address January 29, 1991*] 2003, p.13

³¹ Ibid.

Freedom is not only connected to violence, but paradoxically also connected to both the notions of individualism and that of heroism. The freedom from authoritarian rule and oppression draws upon the struggles of the early settlers to become independent, but at the same time corrupts the concept of self-reliance and individualism by implying that help is needed from the heroic US in order to do so.

The nation is described as unparalleled in its democratic system and is continuously related to notions of 'equality', 'opportunity' and 'freedom.' These notions are then projected onto the American hostages, "who are ceaselessly in our minds and in our efforts."³² The result is a heroic portrayal of the American soldiers that suffer for the struggle of obtaining the very notions themselves and America are described to embody. Although not outright mentioning the nations holding them hostage, the portrayal of the antagonistic Other is embedded in the description of the hostages, preventing the soldiers from their cause and thus representing contradicting values to that of the American nation. The connection of the notion of freedom with violence in the form of military intervention is further portrayed by the President's reading of a letter written by an Army medic before the armed intervention in Panama. The President reads from the letter that the Army was the choice of the man, and that he did so "to serve my country and inure that you are free to do what you want and to live your lives freely."³³ The man is represented as a hero willing to die for the cause of America, and the result is that the American freedom is directly dependant on the elimination of alluded "threats" in other nations by violence.

In facing the challenges of the 90s, Bush refers to the 'American worker', who is described as "the spirit of American ingenuity" and "the most productive worker in the world."³⁴ The progress of the nation is directly related to the hard working, adaptable, ingenuous American worker – similar to the rugged individualists of the early settlers

³² The Pennsylvania State University, 2003, p.4

³³ Ibid., p.9

³⁴ Ibid., p.5

coming to America, who represented adaption to change and hard work as values necessary for survival and progress.

In the outlined role of America to ensure the freedom of all, and to “confront evil for the sake of good in a land so far away”³⁵ Bush appeals to the myth of individualism by speaking directly to the hard working American: “we have a unique responsibility to do the hard work of freedom. (...) We are resolute and resourceful.”³⁶ The qualities of the rugged individualist are raised by notions of hard work, resolution and resourcefulness. The President speaks about the duty to tackle a new wilderness in the form of the oppression of freedom, by appealing to the individualist values that made it possible for the early settlers to conquer their wilderness.

The concept of Social Security plays a fundamental role in influencing the myth of individualism. The American nation is described by Bush to represent endless opportunities for the hard worker, but the realization of the American dream relies on the hard work of the individual – not the collective. The entire notion of America has for a long time relied upon the idea that “hard work pays off” but that the security of one’s own future lies in the self-reliant American. The high costs of the health care system mentioned by Bush³⁷ presents this idea; hard work means being able to secure one’s well-being. The myth of rugged individualism consequently prevails in different forms, both as the values necessary in the American people to form a unified front in the battle for freedom, as well as to ensure his own well-being and future.

3.1.5 Conclusive analysis

Referring to the crumbling of Communism in the State of the Union of 1990 as a result of the efforts of “America and its allies” to ensure the survival of democracy (and freedom) as well as the portrayal of the savagery to be tackled in the world in the speech of 1991 goes to show that the Frontier Myth is still alive in the presidency of Bush. The

³⁵ Ibid., p.14

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷The Pennsylvania State University, 2003, p.8

elimination of the ‘savage’ to the triumph of the heroic American nation is inferred by his reference to Communism and Saddam Hussein, and his outlook for the future being “to take the lead in forging peace and freedom’s best hope”³⁸ suggests that this trend will continue.

The notion of freedom presents a key term or code word that touches upon all the aspects of the Frontier Myth. The notion of freedom portrays the Frontier Myth within a new purpose of the nation – that of acting as a world police or hero, encompassing the classical traits of the Western cowboy, to ensure everyone’s enjoyment of freedom and to eliminate any force in opposition to this goal. The Frontier Myth might therefore be embedded in a new notion, but as can be seen, the underlying motives are the same: the US is self-appointed into a superior role that has the duty of “civilizing” other nations by putting them at level with its own values.

3.2 George W. Bush (2001-2009)

3.2.1 The Myth of the Frontier

Already at the opening of the State of the Union of 2002 – the year after the terrorist attack on 9/11- Bush refers to the Myth of the Frontier. He opens his speech by stating that “the civilized world faces unprecedented dangers.”³⁹ The fundamental border of civilization/wilderness of the Frontier Myth is therefore alluded upon, and is consistently inferred throughout the speech. The monstrous portrayal of terrorist nations is contrasted to the heroic qualities embodied by the US consistently through the speech, Bush openly stating that these nations are excluded from the “civilized world”⁴⁰ and consequently belonging to the savagery and wilderness that the Myth is meant to conquer.

3.2.2 The myth of heroism, violence and individualism

In the presidency of Bush, and fundamentally after the event of 9/11, the notion of ‘terror’ plays an essential role. ‘Terrorist’ replaces the term ‘savage,’ and ‘terror’ that of

³⁸ Ibid., p.9

³⁹ University of Groningen, *American History: From Revolution to Reconstruction and beyond*, 1994-2012, <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/george-w-bush/state-of-the-union-2002.php>, accessed on the 8th of January 2014

⁴⁰ Ibid.

‘wilderness’ as code words under the Myth of the Frontier and in connection to the sub-myth of heroism. The portrayal of the US by Bush Sr. as the heroic actor whose primary object is to ‘free’ countries from oppression is further built upon by George W. Bush in his State of the Union in 2002. He speaks of the US role in freeing the country of Afghanistan from brutal oppression and the elimination of the ‘savage’ by ridding the world “of thousands of terrorists.”⁴¹

The Frontier Myth’s portrayal of the civilization/wilderness struggle into the symbol of ‘savage war’ is replaced by the notion of the ‘war on terrorism’ in the speech. It now assumes the shape of the civilized US representing freedom and justice on the one hand, and the savagery of terrorist nations who encompass unspeakable evil on the other. The notion of terrorists as savages is strengthened as Bush describes them as “ticking time bombs, set to go off without warning.”⁴² The allusion to a ticking bomb results in the portrayal of terrorists as uncontrollable and able to cause extreme damage. Bush effectively portrays terrorism as a threat in direct relation to the notion of freedom, stating that “so long as nations harbour terrorists, freedom is at risk.”⁴³ By further alluding to the American soldiers dying for freedom in the war on terrorism, Bush implies that any war or use of violence is justified as long as it is for this cause. One can therefore see how the Myth is alluded to for the political justification of military intervention, on the one hand by the creation of a savage ‘Other’ to be exterminated, and on the other by a legitimate cause carried out by a ‘hero.’

The notion of rugged individualism and heroic qualities were previously connoted with the notion of masculinity, embodied by classical symbols like the cowboy. In the speech, however, Bush shows that the male dominance over these sub-myths has altered: the “men and women in uniform”⁴⁴ of the Armed Forces have taken the place of the cowboy, portrayed as the new heroes in the war of terrorism. The male dominance of the cowboy

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² University of Groningen, 1994-2012, <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/george-w-bush/state-of-the-union-2002.php>

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

has therefore decreased, but the portrayal of female and male heroes nonetheless embody the same values. The self-reliance and tackling of the wilderness by the rugged individualist is shown by the US resolution to battle terrorism. Bush comments on the necessity of other nations of the world to battle terrorism, but emphasizes the point that “if they do not act, America will.”⁴⁵

Domestically, the qualities presented of the myth of individualism are portrayed in the speech when speaking about employment and American workers. The notion of working for prosperity and progress is again raised as Bush states “When America works, America prospers, so my economic security plan can be summed up in one word: jobs.”⁴⁶ The concept of the self-reliant, hard working American springing from the myth of individualism therefore prevails, but the domestic measure for progress is that of the growth of the economy, which didn’t exist in the origins of the myth. This is however consistent with Slotkin’s arguments of how the myth has been used as the explanation for domestic prosperity in latter years. Like his father, Bush comments upon the necessity of governmental involvement in assisting for health care coverage, but does not venture into specifics about how this will be obtained. An arguable reason for this is that the notion of the myth still has a strong influence on the perception on the American worker not relying on anyone but himself, and being “in charge of his own future.” The importance of self-reliance and the influence of the myth become clearer as Bush states “as we reauthorize these important reforms, we must always remember that the goal is to reduce dependency on government and offer every American the dignity of a job.”⁴⁷

3.2.3 Concluding analysis

The analysis of this speech clearly showed that the Frontier Myth still played an active role in American society and politics during the early 21st century. However, it also demonstrated that some of the classical code words associated with the Myth and its sub-myths had been replaced by others – effectively starting to change the presentation and

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ University of Groningen, 1994-2012, <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/george-w-bush/state-of-the-union-2002.php>

⁴⁷ Ibid.

shape of the Myth in American society.

The foremost code word associated with the Myth was that of terrorism. Whereas freedom played a dominant role in the speeches of Bush Sr., the notion of terrorism took the lead during the presidency of Bush. Classical terms belonging to the Myth like ‘civilization’ were still used by Bush, but the notions of savagery, wilderness and savage war had gained new faces by the notions of terrorists, terrorism and the war on terrorism.

The symbol of the cowboy as the individualist hero was shown to be replaced by female and male soldiers embodying the same qualities. Nevertheless, the role of individualism in the American people and in the American nation was still shown to be incredibly strong in its domestic and foreign policies.

3.3 Barack Obama (2009-Present day)

4.3.1 The Myth of the Frontier

Obama’s references to the Myth are not at all as direct and apparent as those of George W.H. Bush and George W. Bush. The Myth takes a more subtle shape in his State of the Union of 2013, with more allusions to aspects of its sub-myths than the Frontier Myth itself.

3.3.2 The myth of heroism, violence and individualism

The myth of individualism is the most protruding of the sub-myths in Obama’s 2013 State of the Union. In the opening of his speech, Obama confirms that the myth of individualism still plays a central role in the notion of American identity by stating: “Thanks to the grit and determination of the American people, there is much progress to report.”⁴⁸ He then continues to openly refer to the myth by stating: “it is our unfinished task to restore the basic bargain that built this country – the idea that if you work hard and meet your responsibilities, you can get ahead.”⁴⁹ The progress and prosperity of the

⁴⁸ The White House: President Barack Obama, *The 2013 State of the Union*, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/state-of-the-union-2013>, accessed the 8th of January 2014

⁴⁹ Ibid.

American nation is still directly linked to the hard work of the American citizens, and the concept of self-reliance is still essential to the progress of the individual.

The speech follows the notion of the individualist myth that “hard work pays off.” However, Obama presents an alteration to the myth that hasn’t been shown by the previous presidents. The classical aspects of hard work and the rewarding of individual initiative are presented, but the focus placed on self-reliance has been shifted to an increased reliance on the government. In contrast to Bush Sr. and George W. Bush, Obama directly attacks the domestic problems of the nation and explains how these will be solved *with the help of the government*. He maintains a much more critical and honest outlook on the nation’s domestic problems than the previous presidents, as shown by the following quote:

We should do what leaders in both parties have already suggested, and save hundreds of billions of dollars by getting rid of tax loopholes and deductions for the well-off and the well-connected. (...) Why would we choose to make deeper cuts to education and Medicare just to protect special interest tax breaks? How is that fair? (...) How does that promote growth?⁵⁰

Obama, unlike the other Presidents, directly criticizes some aspects of American society and questions the justice of governmental policies. This contradicts the pattern of the political use of the Myth, as it has previously always been used politically as a means of praising the American nation and criticizing the enemies of the USA. As shown by this quote, Obama has instead chosen to integrate the hard work constituted by the myth of individualism in the presentation of the problems of society. His main focus is on the middle class – what would previously be referred to as the working class – and consequently uses the myth of individualism to appeal to this audience but also to direct their concerns. “It is this kind of prosperity – broad, shared, built on a thriving middle class – that has always been the source of our progress at home. It’s also the foundation of our power and influence throughout the world.”⁵¹ His honest and realist approach

⁵⁰ The White House, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/state-of-the-union-2013>

⁵¹ Ibid.

continues as he states that “None of us will get 100 percent of what we want. But the alternative will (...) visit hardship on millions of hardworking Americans.”⁵² The glorification of the American nation in association with the myth has visibly decreased. Instead, Obama’s approach is to use the myth of individualism within a realist context – appealing to the working class by first presenting their concerns and then addressing the solutions to these concerns.

A shift in the discourse about the Frontier Myth is further shown by Obama’s reference to terrorism. A combination of the classical aspects of the Myth with a new approach is again presented as he challenges the duties of the US nation as laid out by George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush: “different al Qaeda affiliates and extremist groups have emerged (...) but to meet this threat, we don’t need to send tens of thousands of our sons and daughters abroad or occupy other nations.”⁵³ The inherent American duty to uphold freedom in the world and free other nations from terrorism is pierced by this statement. In contrast to the speeches of Bush Sr. and Bush Jr., Obama does not consider this to be the primary responsibility of the USA as a world actor – consequently challenging the heroic role previously played by America. However, the myth of heroism still prevails to some extent. Even if Obama stresses the point that the US main role is no longer that of acting as a world police, he adds that where necessary, “we will continue to take direct action against those terrorists who pose the gravest threat to Americans.”⁵⁴

The role of freedom, although altered, still presents a crucial part of the American identity in Obama’s speech. This is shown by his reference of America as “a beacon to all who seek freedom during this period of historic change.”⁵⁵ The greatness of the nation and the US status as a role model for other nations is therefore not something that Obama wishes to alter. Furthermore, he states: “defending our freedom (...) is not just the job of our military alone.”⁵⁶ Defending the freedom of the US nation is therefore still

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

considered a legitimate means for using violence and carrying out military interventions – as long as they pose a *direct threat* to the security of the US nation. The use of the myth therefore prevails in some aspects, but its role in US world affairs has altered.

3.3.3 Concluding analysis

Obama's presidency presents the biggest alteration of the Myth. It can be concluded that the Frontier Myth still prevails in some aspects, but that the classical traits of it have been combined with new approaches that reform the Myth. The honesty of the governmental flaws and criticism of it as presented by Obama's speech are directly opposing to the purposes of the Myth and its previous uses. Instead, the Myth is being used to appeal to the American people in a different way; by directly addressing their concerns and using the Myth to present a solution to these concerns.

The role of the Frontier Myth in the foreign politics of the US has also greatly altered. A more drawn back approach is presented by Obama, where the aspects of the Frontier Myth like heroism and violence are only relevant when they directly threaten the security of the USA.

4. Discussion and Concluding words

The study and analysis of the presidential speeches of George W. H. Bush, George W. Bush and Barack Obama demonstrate that the Frontier Myth has managed to survive to the present day. What is interesting to note is that the discourse surrounding the Myth and the code words and symbols that are stereotypical for its sub-myths have changed; as time goes by, the classical code words belonging to the sub-myths are replaced with contemporary ones that nevertheless symbolize the same thing.

Obama's speech showed that the pillars underlying the Myth are still present, but their space and girth has decreased dramatically, and direct references to the Frontier Myth showed an enormous reduction when analysing Obama's State of the Union. The image of the American nation is still that of a free, great and just nation – but the discourse surrounding it has become increasingly honest, critical and realistic.

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