

The Stories We Tell Ourselves Are Often Blinding and Horribly Consequential

This summary of journalist Tony Horwitz's book, *A Voyage Long and Strange*, an investigative exploration of places in American public memory and myth, recently caught my attention: "After Horwitz untangled many complex and messy traditions, he concluded that when a sacred national story rises to the level of myth, it is nearly impossible to deconstruct."

In other words, myths of a certain "stature" tend to trump permanently whatever may be the historical facts.

The Horwitz reference arrested me in part because I had just read Washington Post commentator Eugene Robinson on removing the statue of Robert E. Lee from its prominent pedestal in Richmond, Virginia. As Robinson observes, Lee was far from the exemplary human being touted by his defenders. Rather, he was a cruel slave owner, a less than successful military commander, and traitor to his country. His decision to take up arms against the Union led to the loss of hundreds of thousands of American lives.

Horwitz's observation about sacred national myths also resonated with recent news about the new book, *Forget the Alamo: The Rise and Fall of an American Myth*. A Time magazine article was headlined, "We've Been Telling the Alamo Story Wrong for Nearly 200 Years. Now It's Time to Correct the Record." The article declares, "So much of what we 'know' about the battle is provably wrong." For example, Davy Crockett did not go down fighting bravely with his compatriots. He surrendered and was executed, many others fled the mission but were run down and killed.

The Alamo is central to an origin story of mythic proportions, one based on distortions and fabrications, obscuring certain painful truths such as that "slavery was the single issue that regularly drove a wedge between early Mexican governments – dedicated abolitionists all – and their American colonists in Texas."

These are just two examples of myths that have long triumphed over facts. Horwitz writes about many others. But these two myths are currently being deconstructed. Perhaps Horwitz is wrong about the dim prospects for setting history right. That remains to be seen. My guess is that, had the South not lost the Civil War, these myths would remain virtually unquestioned to this day.

Now consider one of the newest and most consequential of sacred national stories, the one recently and widely rehearsed on the 20th anniversary of its seminal events. Presuming to "know" what we're talking about, we call it simply 9/11. Few people recognize the 9/11 story for the conspiracy theory that it is. The real question is how much of it is true, and how much is fabrication. The story, almost immediately promulgated by official news sources based on accounts provided by key sources in the Bush-Cheney administration, quickly took hold of a traumatized nation. This significantly explains why it resists deconstruction despite massive evidence that fails to support and often contradicts crucial elements of the narrative.

We've just pulled out of Afghanistan, our nation's longest and arguably most ill-considered war.

Many – perhaps most – Americans now see that the events of 9/11 served as pretext for that war as well as the invasion of Iraq. What few Americans seem prepared to consider – because most of us still believe in our hearts the myth of American exceptionalism – is that the events of 9/11 not only served as pretext for what followed, but may have been intended as such.

Until we are ready to pursue this question without prejudice, we will remain in thrall to the myth of 9/11, unable to discern deeply painful truths that might enable us to chart a different course as a people and nation.

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