

Reagan's 'myth' embraced, despite reality

All nations have their myths, most of them innocuous; some of them, like the Wagnerian nonsense of pre-war Germany, downright dangerous. America is no exception. It believes, for instance, in the so-called Horatio Alger myth even though to go from rags to riches is infinitely more rare than to go from rags to rags.

Still, politicians contradict national myths at their peril. Walter Mondale did it — and suffered the consequences.



Richard Cohen

The myth that Mondale implicitly questioned had to do with class. He suggested that there is such a thing in America and, moreover, that many people are mired in the lowest ones. He had a program for these people. He would tax the rich and their corporations and use the money to comfort the poor and the near poor. Mondale employed the terms "middle income" and "modest" which is the closest any American politician gets to mentioning class.

Ronald Reagan, on the other hand, disdained such terminology. In his rhetoric and undoubtedly in his sincerely held beliefs, America is or ought to be a classless society. Through industry and hard work, the poor can become the unpoor. He is entitled to his view because this is what happened to him. The son of a small-town alcoholic became a Hollywood movie star, a millionaire, and the President of the United States. Horatio Alger had nothing on him.

Economists say that the truth is mostly on Mondale's side and that Reagan is the exception — he and his millionaire friends. They pointed, instead, to the millions who were born poor and remain poor, or, even worse, to those erstwhile blue-collar workers whose economic plight has deepened as their industries rust toward extinction. To them, as to

many Americans, economic and social class has the feel of cement shoes.

But reality is no match for myth — not even when you know what the truth is. It's likely there was nothing Mondale could have done to beat Reagan. But when he walked of Americans of modest means, he managed not only to evoke class, but the word "failure" as well. If you are of modest means, if you are poor, Mondale seemed to be saying, that's what you'll always be. And his promise to you was not pie-in-the-sky success, but mere amelioration of your plight. He would make things a wee bit better — Medicaid, Social Security and all of that.

This was the traditional Democratic message, freeze-dried to its essence. All you had to do was add myth. But Mondale, for some reason, couldn't do that. His vision of American excludied so much, you had to wonder who he was talking about — and how dare he trample on hope?

Even among his own staff there were many whose origins were humble, and who, through sheer accomplishment, had earned their ticket to his campaign plane. One of those I talked to said he could connect intellectually to what Mondale was saying, but emotionally it was a different matter. For this Mondale aide, the American Dream had come true.

Two years ago, Mondale's message might have worked. The nation was in the worst recession since the Great Depression. Unemployment approached 12 percent and people lined the streets, waiting for surplus cheese. There are still people on the cheese lines and Mondale got most of their votes. But those off the lines or who were never on them, didn't want the "cheese" of increased federal programs, but the chance to reach for something grand — success American style. Overwhelmingly, they rejected Mondale.

Myths have their durability, but they have their utility, too. A nation that believes in the Horatio Alger myth will produce an occasional Horatio Alger hero and he, or she, will enrich the society. A nation that rejects that myth turns its

back on hope, accepts the status quo and looks to government to do what the people feel they can not do for themselves.

In a perfect world, there would have been a candidate who offered both hope and reality. That didn't happen this year. Instead, given a choice between one or the other, America chose the candidates

who innocently embraced myth and spurned the one who seemed to reject it entirely.

It's no surprise that the Myth Merchant won. In a world where success comes retail, he promised it wholesale. Myth made it an easy sell. Reality says he can't deliver.

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