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Self-Made: The Story of American Identity

Abstract

This paper investigates the concept of the "Self-Made Man" in U.S. politics; specifically, it analyzes the term's historical evolution as well as the ways in which it continues—indirectly or otherwise—to influence American national identity, policymaking, and American cultural and political discourse. Specifically, the project seeks to examine how and why self-made mythology evolved in the United States, and the extent to which it persists today. Second, it assesses how politicians make use of self-made mythos to promote their own campaigns and articulate their policy platform to the electorate. To do this, the paper relies primarily on textual and narrative analysis. Furthermore, it is divided into two sections; the first focuses on the cultural development of self-made mythology, the second assesses the leadership style, campaign rhetoric, and policies advocated by several modern U.S. Presidents as case studies.

Key Words

Self-made, national identity, campaign, rhetoric, culture, American Dream

PART I: Self-Made Mythology & American Identity

Introduction

You can measure the moral integrity of any civilization by the span of time it takes for its members to sacrifice their holy men and subsequently build an altar for their worship, only to tear it down again. This cyclical process of death and resurrection represents more than mere metaphor, but in fact stands as an apt characterization of a culture centered around the edification of certain great individuals. Whether these persons are indeed great remains a mixed matter of

historical debate and popular acclamation. In the United States, no type of individual commands as much attention or nebulous respect as the self-made man. Lacking kings, queens, and other forms of nobility, the national gaze instead directs itself towards celebrities, artists, preachers, entrepreneurs, and, in the worst case, politicians.

A critical analysis of the self-made person[1] offers an equally compelling examination of American politics and its evolution. On a cultural level, the very notion of being self-made has been the subject of repeated interrogation due to the ways in which the rhetorical deployment of the concept has been used to advance contentious arguments regarding the relationship between hard work, identity, and success. In the policy arena, this typically unfolds through arguments on welfare programs for the disadvantaged and unemployed, educational access and equity, and other forms of state-sponsored socio-economic mobility. Far from being a modern debate arising from the "Great Society" reforms of the Johnson administration, it dates further back to the Gilded Age and arguably to the first waves of industrialization in the country. The key to understanding this concept and its practical implications possibly rests in its relationship to another, perhaps more ubiquitous idea within our cultural and political discourse: the American Dream.

The American Dream and Self-Made Myth are similar, but not identical. In fact, the term *self-made man*, was first coined by Henry Clay in 1832, preceding the American Dream by nearly a century—the latter being coined by James Truslow Adams in 1931. This is not to say that the self-made man gave birth to the American Dream, per se, but rather that both are elements of a common American tradition rooted in individualism and the Protestant work ethic.

[1] Hereafter abbreviated as SMP; or, when plural, SMPs. In a similar vein, "self-made mythology" will be abbreviated as SMM.

Of course, to articulate the full difference between the two, and why one is worthy of study in comparison to the other, the historical context must first be set forward.

The origin traces back to Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, published in 1793, only a few years following the Constitutional Convention and squarely within the middle of Washington's Presidency. The autobiography reveals intimate details regarding the Renaissance man of the Revolution, and, in many ways, sets the stage for the self-made ideology within the United States. I say "ideology" here and not mythology since, at this early stage in the nation's history, the notion of reinventing oneself and overcoming the barriers of one's upbringing resided not in the realm of fantasy or cultural projection, but in reality[2]. At the same time, it certainly proved out of reach for some—the term itself not only seems rather dated, but could also be interpreted as exclusionary to women, African Americans, and Native Americans, since black freedmen and slaves were barred from consideration as full citizens and even recognition as human beings under the law. This exposes a critical fault within the self-made ideology—who is permitted to reinvent themselves in the first place[3]? It seems patently clear that the term has historically been applied exclusively to WASP men. However, as with many political and cultural fixtures within American society, the circle of ownership slowly expands with increased agitation by and participation from historically excluded minorities. There are indeed various instances of self-made persons—the role of women in advancing conceptions of agency in this nation are significant and historic—from Anne Hutchinson's theological rebellion in colonial times to Madame C.J. Walker as modern-day heroine for black entrepreneurship (Miller 2013).

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[2] It can be argued that the notion of self-fashioning has always held a fantastical element in the American imagination. Winthrop's invocation of the biblical "city on a hill", Locke's claim that, "in the beginning, all the World was America" (*2nd Treatise,* §49), or even the conquistador's search for El Dorado. Nevertheless, these attractions, at the time, did not possess the widespread cultural power that the self-made ideology currently enjoys in a variety of media.

[3] Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream*

These questions and individuals are important and should be taken up. Nevertheless, this paper, which is primarily oriented around fictional and political figures, brackets their contributions for later research.

The line between the fictional and political realm is important for SMM, as the original notion of the SMP was not isolated to politics, but was also linked to industry and personal morality. Franklin's own recounting of his life includes a general outline for success, a "Plan for Attaining Moral Perfection" which unfolds through a simple 12-step sequence. The strategy's content is less significant than the form it takes—the idea put forth, that life and the complexities of ethical and moral behavior are such that a rudimentary regimen can lead one not only to success, but perfection, suggests something deeper about the American psyche. Whether the exceptionalism one seeks is of a psychological kind (which invariably leads to a regrettable, almost Randian celebration of the ego), a political type, as envisioned by the "more perfect union" of the Founders, or even of a quasi-religious sort, represented by Winthrop's ideal of a "city on a hill" matters little. Perfectionism is ingrained into the American cultural and political tradition.

In this sense, the relationship between perfectionism and history is of note. There remains a persistent, uniquely American tendency for rose-colored nostalgia, especially in the political arena. Thanks to the efficient and artful establishment of the American civil religion, elevating the Revolutionary Age and its leaders to a sacrosanct status, politicians thereafter played into this field, crafting the self-made myth to support protectionist economic policies. Clay's own speech, which spoke the self-made man into existence, was in fact an articulation and defense of his "American System", an economic plan that capitalized on the outburst of nationalism following the War of 1812 while promoting robust interstate trade through federally funded infrastructure

projects and the imposition of tariffs. Ironically enough, the foundation for the individualistic, scrappy American entrepreneur is to be found in a proposal for government-sponsored, federally subsidized programs.

In addition to the practical applications of self-made ideology in federal policymaking, the 19th century also saw a spiritual renewal within the school. While Franklin's "Plan for Attaining Moral Perfection" smacks of the Protestant Work Ethic that animated much of colonial and modern-day America, there remains another critical, if underrated source of self-made ideology: transcendentalism. Rooted in the theological doctrine of Unitarianism, it soon developed into a philosophical movement in its own right. Notable members like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau offered lasting contributions regarding the identity, individualism, civil disobedience, and the importance of nature. Emerson's "Self-Reliance" can be read as the starting point for a new conception of the self-made man, one that relies not on external achievement in the forms of social status or monetary gain, but internal consciousness and contemplation of the eternal divine—typically found in the solace of nature. This conception of individuality is far more concerned with the spiritual domain, rather than the financial marketplace. In many ways, it represents an intellectual reaction to, and critique of, the ascendance of industrial capitalism.

Where does this leave us? Mythology and ideology. The imagined and the invented. I maintain that the SMM represents a merging of the two; it grips both the practical world of politics and the fictive imagination of American culture. In this way, there is little difference between William Randolph Hearst and Charles Foster Kane. Perhaps it is some indictment on our culture that the fictional Citizen Kane has more staying power than the man he was based on. It does not escape notice that, as the nation increasingly concerns itself with the great task of

"reckoning" with its various historical misdeeds; chief amongst them being the legacy of slavery and systemic racism —the hero-worship inherent in the SMM has undergone renewed scrutiny. Additionally, in an economic context where the gap between the wealthiest Americans and their working-class counterparts has reached historic levels, the rhetorical appeal of the concept also seems to have lost its saliency. The individualist ethos has been challenged by the rise of populism, of the clarion calls made first by the Occupy Movement and even by the anti-establishment language of the Tea Party, later activated by President Trump. Whether it is the message "We Are the 1 Percent" or "Drain the Swamp", the core of American politics today—on both the left and right—seems animated by a growing sentiment that the SMM (and by extension, the American Dream), is harder to realize today than in previous eras.

Criticism & Analysis

The self-made mythology extends far beyond the political realm and into the cultural development of the United States. Whether this is seen in the modern-day advent of self-help books or the hype-and-grind atmosphere of Wall-Street hustlers and online entrepreneurs matters little. It exists. Not only does it exist, it *evolves*, it *persists* like a cultural virus—encoding itself into our national genome. Though the term "self-made man", especially in a postfeminist era, and in a cultural moment wherein corporate America projects a socially conscious, inclusive image, seems rather outdated, the core notion of personal responsibility reverberates across the political spectrum (Cullen 2013). In the post-WWII academic environment, the concept faced its most lengthy and powerful criticism, usually from scholars with Marxist, or Marxist-adjacent influences. In this lens, the ideology of personal responsibility is nothing less than an elite invention, a social narrative constructed to distract or otherwise restrain working-class Americans from collective social reform (Cullen 2013). Such a conception would place the self-

made mythos in common company with the American Dream, civil religion, and the Frontier thesis.

These concepts share a core similarity in that, under a critical eye, they serve two primary functions: the maintenance of American capitalism, and the perseverance of the Union. Are the former and latter goals one and the same? This question, while important in understanding how the economic and cultural power of capitalism has contributed to national unity, deserves a paper on its own. Indeed, some scholars maintain that true capitalism has either never existed in the United States, or that it had a short-lived life, beginning with the abolition of slavery in 1865 and ending with the ascendance of segregationist economic policies, the more general rise of nativism during the late 19th and early 20th centuries—culminating in the passage of the 1924 Immigration Act and other associated legislative acts.

While the Dream does not always lend itself to an economic interpretation (indeed, many Americans view the Dream within the context of social success, familial security, etc.) the material conditions associated with the Dream should not be ignored. After all, the Dream's allure is derived from the potential for it to become a reality. This prevailing (if sometimes blind) faith is also susceptible to manipulation and perversion by certain institutions—look no further than the popular obsession with gambling, lotteries, and "get-rich-quick" schemes, most recently evidenced by the ongoing speculation in the cryptocurrency market (Duncan 2014). I argue that these vices are not entirely incongruous with American culture and SMM at large. Recalling Franklin's "Plan for Moral Perfection" is it any wonder that this reductive tendency has, somehow or another, persisted throughout American culture? Certainly, the man himself would not have smiled upon such trends; nevertheless, it signifies the numerous modes in which these tropes have operated and continue to operate.

In parallel, the SMM is subject to the same corruption through pop-psychology, the New-Age motivational speakers, and the impotent language of contemporary, feel-good individualism. By this latter notion I refer to the tendency, on both the political left and the right, to adhere to phrases like, “self-love”, “self-care” or (perhaps in a more aggressive, even masculine tone), “grindset”[4], which itself is associated with rather simplistic and toxic classifications of persons as “alphas”, “betas”, and ‘sigmas”. Such terms are admittedly more prevalent amongst the younger generation and have limited penetration into the popular discourse. In fact, such language might be a unique byproduct of an online ecosystem that selects for novel, somewhat comedic slang. The differences between these competing camps are of tone: one is saccharine; the other dishonest. Unveiled, they amount to the difference between smothering and suffocation. Indeed, the apparent gendered distinction between these words (i.e. that, as far as usage is concerned, one is more associated with left-leaning, radical politics and feminine spaces, the other with conservative or the alt-right’s rhetoric surrounding masculinity) highlights the extent to which the concept of self-mastery has transformed and adapted to culture wars of the 21st century.

It can be argued that the self-made man’s decline in cultural currency is linked with the general crisis of American manhood since the reassessment of gender roles initiated by second and third-wave feminism in the past 50 years. On a sociological level, WASP men, who have benefited most from the prevalence of SMM—may now be suffering from a kind of aggrieved entitlement as the concept endures new criticism and the general stature of archetypal self-made men is challenged. For example, what scholar Cornel West has termed the “gangsterization” of American culture, which connotes the breakdown of social norms and a rising culture of fear, is

[4] It should be noted that this word is widely used amongst the entrepreneurial circles, evoking the self-made mythology’s close links to the business world. “Self-made” also became synonymous with the archetypal American businessman through the efforts of Republican politicians—though this too was anticipated by Henry Clay’s original speech (Cullen 2013).

only an alternate articulation of a spiritual decay within the US. For every J.D. Rockefeller, there is an Al Capone. A warped vision of self-made men is one that sees no meaningful distinction between the two and opts for the way of the outlaw (itself a popular character in American westerns). In philosophical terms, the American self-made man may very well be an equivalent of Nietzsche's *übermensch*, who rejects all prescribed moral codes and imposes their own on the world. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the ideal of American manhood was the self-made man, whether he be the frontiersman or captain of industry—a hero to his age, but now seen as an agent of settler colonialism or shameless exploiter of the working class.

No longer are we content to sanctify great men or women, but instead praise past periods and era-defining movements with that ever-so capricious eye of the present. Such is evidenced by the politico-speak of American politicians—noticeably within the Democratic Party—which does not condemn their opposition with the language of the present or with the looming threat of future consequences, but through an appeal to history—that omniscient judge of character. This was notably the case in the impeachment trials of President Trump. To admonish one's political rivals through a thinly veiled nod to self-interest (i.e., "What will be *my* legacy? How will history judge *my* actions?") is, either intentionally or not, a brilliant stroke of political maneuvering as it exploits the Achilles heel of SMM. Even if we grant that individuals, through their own industry and machination, can rise above the circumstances of their birth, environment, or otherwise fulfill their wildest expectations in *this* life, such an occurrence would not bear at all on their legacy. Even if a person can make themselves and reach the pantheon of gods, they cannot long secure their position amongst them; for, they cannot control how others remember them. Today's saints become tomorrow's sinners and vice versa. Each age determines their method of hero-worship. In the US, it appears as though the current trend is not to outright downplay the

significance of individual actors, the heroes and heroines of a given age, but to show the pores in their marble faces and add color to a previously black-and-white picture of national history.

Hero-Worship, Representation & Fiction

While the SMP has predominately been imagined as a WASP male, it must be stated that the concept holds importance for the African American community as well. The most well-known SMP's in African American history, Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, stand out in this field due to the unique perspectives on self-made ideology and social mobility, maintaining the importance of individuality while challenging and clarifying fundamental elements couched within it. Their experiences, rooted in the horrors of slavery and eventual rise to prominence perhaps signify the ultimate examples of self-made men. However, they are wary in their articulations of the concept and reaffirm a deeper commitment to community and the virtues of hard work.

The self-made man, couched in the historical context of Reconstruction, offers a vision of black excellence amidst newfound freedoms and opportunities. At the same time, when such freedoms were curbed by white terrorist acts and the implementation of Black Codes in the South, SMM presented a general outline for the race's measured advancement. Of course, there remains a risk of the self-made man, in virtue of being "indebted to himself for himself" (Douglass) deriving a terrible egotism and sense of superiority over their peers who, perhaps through no fault of their own, cannot through the best of their efforts, lift themselves up by their proverbial bootstraps. In this way, the invented individual universalizes one's own experience—placing an impossible standard onto the world with which to measure each member's work ethic and consequent worthiness of success. This standard is impossible precisely because it is

idiosyncratic. Such a view would fragment the community at large. To prevent such a possibility, the strategies employed by both Douglass and Washington emphasize education in their SMM. Both Douglass and Washington's autobiographies stress the central role of education in their personal formation and journeys towards liberation. In the case of Douglass, this is meant in the most literal ways as slaveowners of his day forbade their slaves from learning how to read—tacitly admitting that literacy was the pathway to freedom on an individual and collective basis. In every successful student, there is a teacher of equal promise. Washington's Tuskegee Institute took up this mantle and escalated the self-reliant ethos by directing its pedagogy to industrial education, rather than the humanities (which were promoted by contemporaries of Washington, most notably W.E.B. Du Bois). This doctrine sought to instill a new kind of pride and dignity in physical labor, which Washington believed was unduly marred by the institution of slavery. In his Atlanta Exposition speech, he argued that there was "as much dignity in tilling a field as writing a poem". In a larger sense, Washington's articulation draws from transcendentalist philosophy due to the importance it places on the agent's relationship to nature and one's own body. Moreover, it is decidedly pragmatic in is worldview—while not discounting the importance of purely creative activities (of which poetry is only one example) Washington focuses on material actions not only for their economic value, but also for their character-building potential. Physical labor provides the additional benefit of strengthening community ties, as essential activities like agriculture and construction rely on teamwork. Amidst a national effort at reconstruction, the black community embarked on its own reconstructive project, formulating a new society after their long night of bondage. The SMM, as articulated by Douglass and Washington, played a critical part in the black community's reconceptualization of communal responsibility, labor, education, and, and personal agency.

Simultaneously, the influence of these men lay in part to their status as self-made individuals—the staying power of their personal narratives uniquely situates them as role models for the next generation to emulate. This fact presents a peculiar question to self-made mythology—how can an individual story of will and enterprise be nationalized and, to a large extent, transformed into a heavy expectation upon its population? The answer lies in the fictive realm. In transforming real individuals into historical icons, complex narratives become simple stories. In an odd twist of fate, the imagined, fictional self takes on a life of its own and can even supplant the memory of the original self; in other cases, the fictional needs no basis but itself.

For evidence, look no further than the ways in which the nation's various writers and artists have interpreted the self-made man; the best example (and indictment) being *The Great Gatsby.* F. Scott Fitzgerald's seminal work, and its titular character, relies on an imagined past. However, Gatsby's success, as revealed throughout the novel, represents the corruption rather than achievement of the American Dream. He is certainly self-made, literally reinventing himself through a name-change. His meteoric rise from poverty sharply contrasts with his humble beginnings on a heartland farm. This awareness only further entrenches Gatsby's "platonic conception of himself" (Fitzgerald 76). What is interesting about the psychology of Gatsby as a sort of cultural archetype for the self-made man is that the reader's perception of him gets filtered through the sentimental, observant eyes of the narrator, Nick. Even when Fitzgerald lets Gatsby speak for himself; notably, his naïve insistence that one can repeat the past, these self-reported insights only add to the confusion.

Gatsby only represents one kind of SMP: the one seen from outside himself. The narrator's distance, ironically, brings us closer—perhaps not to Gatsby as a character—but to the essence of the self-made person. Throughout the course of the novel, Gatsby—himself a

commentary on SMM—slowly morphs in Nick's eyes, from a tragic hero to the personification of the American Dream. His life is the great party, a grand spectacle orchestrated for an audience of one. His death represents the comedown, the crash, the hangover, the day after tomorrow. The opposite of the American Dream is not a nightmare; it is the dispassionate and hard-faced truth of reality. And what is this truth? The recognition that our legends, our stone monuments were in fact flesh and bone, no more human than the rest of us? Does this recognition lead to the slow growth of atheism regarding the nation's civil religion, one of its tenets being the belief in meritocracy, that success and hard work are directly linked on a causative basis? Success (at least on a material level) is neither wholly a game of luck, nor is it the sole product of earnest effort. For what (or who) does one undertake the effort of becoming self-made? If the underlying reasonings lie outside the agent, then to what extent can one truly say that X or Y person is indeed self-made? Should not the motivation be intrinsic? Self-motivated? In Gatsby's case, it may be argued that his "perception of material and financial wealth as a path toward personal fulfillment is a product of his misconception of the principles that define the American dream" (Izaguirre 2014). Chasing the status symbols of the modern age—cars, jewels, clothing, and more—Gatsby plays into a corrupted vision of American success. It is fitting then, that his ambition is eventually derailed by the excesses that defined the Jazz Age (which themselves precipitated the Great Depression) and a tragic obsession with Daisy, his impossible, idealized love. In the end, it is not Gatsby's ambition that kills him, but the object of his ambition—too perfect to bear reality.

Conclusion

The historical and cultural development of SMM reveals that the core of American national identity is centered around personal agency and liberty. Even the Declaration of

Independence admits this, recognizing that among mankind's inalienable rights is the "pursuit of happiness", not happiness itself. The greatest of freedoms, according to the American tradition, is the liberty to find one's own struggle and purpose—overcoming such obstacles through hard work and perseverance naturally leads to success—material or otherwise. This paper assumes the conventional wisdom that politics operates downstream of culture. Therefore, the cultural analysis in this section sets the stage for the next, which examines three of the nation's past Presidents. After all, one should not forget that presidents and policymakers are not exempt from the ubiquitous cultural influence of SMM—neither are they mere byproducts of it. However, it is an understated observation that our leaders are themselves steeped in SMM—it may feel strange to imagine Theodore Roosevelt reading a Horatio Algers novel, Ronald Reagan reading Andrew Carnegie's autobiography as a young man in the Depression, or even Richard Nixon, who reportedly watched the 1974 film adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* in the midst of the Watergate scandal. Far from being above culture in a separate sphere, closed off to the public, they are in fact part of the public. Such a realization has important consequences when it comes to assessing presidential personalities and the ways SMM has been articulated in different ways in the policy realm throughout American history. Finally, it exposes the odd situation where SMM perpetuates itself; self-made persons take up the mantle of previous business leaders, politicians, or other role models only to emulate them—self-fashioning according to the style of an imagined past.

PART II: The American Presidency and the Self-Made Man

Introduction

At a New Hampshire town hall, then-candidate Donald Trump made a startling claim to modesty. "It has not been easy for me. It has not been easy for me. I started off in Brooklyn. My father gave me a small loan of a million dollars". From these humble beginnings, Trump curated

an almost irresistible image, aided by his outlandish television persona, bombastic (and controversial) public statements—like a car wreck—he made himself too terrible and intriguing for the audience to turn away. While Trump's comments seem largely tone-deaf, given the growing income disparities between the upper and lower classes of the country, it is nonetheless fascinating to note how presidential candidates, whether they are billionaire celebrities or log-cabin rail splitters, attempt to align themselves with the common mythology of the "self-made man."

Given the long historical evolution of the concept, as well as the ways in which competing ideologies have championed (or critiqued) it in American culture, it becomes clear that a more in-depth analysis is needed to uncover the tangible impact it has—and continues to have—on national politics. This section seeks to uncover the following: How do Presidents (on the campaign trail or in office) make use of the "self-made" myth to promote the interests of their individual campaigns, as well as articulate or even accomplish policy goals? To this end, I argue that during their campaigns and administrations, Presidents rely on the self-made myth to simultaneously market and unify their personal narrative with their larger policy goals; in doing so, they curate a populist public image that differentiates them from Congress and strengthens the notion of personality-centered politics.

I will primarily rely on textual and narrative analysis to complete this project. The former method is useful when examining the various speeches, policy papers, and campaign literature released by candidates throughout modern American political history. The latter assists in this effort by contextualizing each candidate and the public image they present to the electorate. Whether this persona is one that the subject (candidate) somehow agrees with and maintains on a personal level matters little for the purposes of this paper, though it does present an interesting

question regarding the psyche of politicians particularly, and public figures generally—to what extent does one identify with their "public" self-image?

For concision's sake, and to simultaneously provide a suitable overview of how "self-made" mythology has evolved in the United States, I will give a short summary of the term's history before proceeding with three case studies. These examples include Presidents Nixon, Clinton, and Obama. Aside from the fact that these administrations are roughly separated from each other by 20 years, thus situating them in their own unique political and historical contexts, they are also similar in that all of them won a second term in office and, by most metrics, were relatively successful in achieving their policy goals in their first term. Most importantly, each of these men carefully portrayed themselves, not only during their presidential campaigns, but throughout their careers as self-made men, interpreting the concept according to their own political worldview.

The start of personality politics and permanent campaigning was first anticipated by political scientists in the mid-20th century. During this period, scholars like Neustadt developed a lasting analysis that rightfully noted the role of public perception and expectation on a President's ability to persuade and therefore govern effectively (Wegge 1981). The self-made narrative offers a new conceptual tool to examine not only how candidates and incumbents curate their image, but also why the self-made trope specifically gets deployed and reinterpreted in political contests.

In the case of Presidents Nixon, Clinton, and Obama, self-made mythology does not offer a unifying ideal or schematic; in fact, one notable contention of this paper is that each of these leaders differed quite dramatically from one another regarding their respective definitions of what being "self-made" practically looks like in the United States. Nevertheless, being self-made

does not necessarily impact the types of policies they advocate for, only it lends them a beneficial rhetorical light. By way of analogy, if the political prisoner's cry for freedom rings far truer than the beleaguered protests of an aristocrat—then so too does the self-made person's stance on American values resonate to a greater extent than those faceless factions so often vilified by everyday Americans, whether they be "the interests", the "elites", or any other pejorative meant to incite populist energies.

So how do these Presidents account for themselves as self-made men? In upbringing, they lacked the rugged aesthetic offered by Turner's "Frontier thesis". As young men, their political education was defined by national tumult. Nixon's college years were in the midst of the Depression, and he later served in WWII. Clinton's flirtations with 60's anti-war activism at Oxford were tempered by his decision to subject himself to the draft; his pragmatic rationale being to, "maintain…political viability within the system". Obama's journey, perhaps typical of his generation, was more firmly rooted in a search for personal identity first, and political identity second[5] (insofar as the two can be distinguished from one another).

The way a self-made man succeeds in politics is not by staking out one's claim openly, but by slowly, bit by bit, weaving one's way into the national conversation, such that no discussion on *any* topic can be rightfully carried out without a name-drop or two. In this way, politics is a game of name-recognition and reputation-building. This idea is not entirely different from Neustadt's own model of presidential power, wherein prestige plays a pivotal role in the Executive's ability to effectively bargain (Wegge 1981).

[5] Describing his upbringing in his autobiography, *Dreams From My Father*, Obama remembered his adolescence as, "a time when boys aren't supposed to want to follow their fathers' tired footsteps, when the imperatives of harvest or work in the factory aren't supposed to dictate identity, so that how to live is bought off the rack or found in magazines…Each of us chose a costume, armor against uncertainty".

Richard Nixon - Self-Made Magician

In comparison to most modern Presidents, Nixon stands out because his claim to modest and humble origins is borne out by the facts—as opposed to others who exaggerate the conditions of their upbringing in order to score political points. Born in Yorba Linda, California to a family of Quakers, Nixon observed the quiet restraint and intellectual rigor of religious life, while remaining a politician at heart. This does not concern religion as much as it concerns the predominance of American culture, especially ideas like the self-made man. "The competitive society out of which the success myth and the self-made man have grown may accept the Christian virtues in principle but can hardly observe them in practice" (Hofstadter 1955). Furthermore, Nixon's academic intensity and serious demeanor made him stand apart from his peers while also providing a built-in chip on his shoulder[6]. At Whittier College, he founded his own fraternal club—the Orthogonians[7]—to counter the more popular and elite society, the Franklins. This joint pursuit of campus reputation and youthful drive communicates the kind of ambition motivated by interior resentment and insecurity.

Nixon, an adept expert in political theatre and the art of prestidigitation, was a master of his craft—not because he was a naturally talented actor[8], but because, like all great actors, the gift of his mask derived from careful study and a fragment of wounded truth. Hence, the overall political style of Nixon can be succinctly encapsulated by the phrase, "content over style" (Wills 1970). His rise to the Vice-Presidency was less a matter of luck than of careful maneuvering and timely partisanship. He made his political name during the Hiss case as a staunch anti-

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[6] After all, at a certain point standing apart and being socially isolated are one and the same.
[7] "Orthogon" in Greek means square, or right-angled. In the slang of his time, Nixon was already embracing his status as an outsider, a "square".
[8] Nixon performed in drama productions at Whittier College and even participated in a community play, where he later met his future wife Patricia.

Communist while pivoting against the fanatical tendencies of others in the Republican party, namely Senator Joe McCarthy. Alongside Eisenhower, the national hero of Normandy, Nixon provided a partisan punch to the ticket—an individual marked by his orientation towards key issues like foreign policy. Unfortunately, it was this same dynamic that may have led Nixon to defeat in his 1960 campaign against Kennedy. As Vice-President, he languished under the shadow of Eisenhower—who could hope to compete with a war-hero? Amongst the backdrop of the economically stable and culturally stagnant 1950's, an established partisan like Nixon could not compete (at least optically) with the fresh and idealistic style of John F. Kennedy.

After a series of defeats, notably his loss in the 1962 California gubernatorial election, the politics of resentment, which built up throughout the middle-60's, provided the fuel to recharge and galvanize Nixon's 1968 presidential bid. He failed to do so in 1960 since the façade of American life, with its naïve trust in institutions, both public and private, had yet to be fully shaken by the cultural shockwaves of the 60's and its revolutionary, radical proposals. In this context, Nixon, whose political magic garnered power not so much from the outrage that might have characterized campaigns like Governor Wallace's, but more from the quiet disapproval of the masses—which he so aptly identified and labelled the "silent majority". For Nixon, as well as his base of support, his definition of the self-made myth had a particularly punishing side. "The deserving rise; if the undeserving are also helped, what happens to the scoring in this game of spiritual effort and merit badges? The free-market of virtue and soul-making is destroyed by such 'controls,' such interference with incentive" (Wills 1970). In this light, it is interesting to note how such attitudes influenced how Nixon tailored SMM in his campaign's outreach to minority voters. For example, his platform extolled the virtues of "black entrepreneurship" and "black capitalism". This alone would not represent anything significant if not for the fact that, once

elected, Nixon made good on his campaign promises to shore up the African American business community. In 1969, Nixon penned Executive Order 11458, which prescribed, "arrangements for developing and coordinating a national program for minority business enterprise". Whether the policy was motivated by a shrewd attempt to cut into the Black vote matters little; ultimately, it resulted in the first Small Business Administration loans being made available to Black professionals.

Nixon's presidential campaign, along with his administration, was characterized by a new kind of American disillusionment with the status quo. The New-Deal Democrats, the "Great Society" reforms of the Johnson presidency had lost their hold on power—the keys to the Oval Office being tossed away somewhere between the fields of Vietnam, the streets of Chicago, and the slow-but-sure political realignment of the American South. To Nixon, it was not possible for an individual to become self-made in a time of social chaos; only through "law and order" (one of his more infamous phrases) could the system function like a meritocracy. Nevertheless, he lacked the political capital to undo the previous administration's accomplishments, programs like Medicare, Medicaid, or support for affirmative action, seen in LBJ's Executive Order 11246. His reactionary stance was confined largely to rhetoric. However, his greatest legacies—achievements in opening US-China relations, developing shuttle diplomacy during the Yom Kippur War, and concluding the Anti-Ballistic Treaty with the USSR, all suggest a character which, much like his boyhood self, seeks success outside himself, to process and develop new products and issues to make his name.

Bill Clinton - Scholarship & the Promises of Meritocracy

From a poor Arkansas home to the prestigious halls of Oxford, William Jefferson Clinton's political journey was marked by a desire not only to join the elites, but to become one

of them. Unlike Nixon's intense erudition and carefully managed character studies (à la his now infamous "Checkers" speech), Clinton's approach was more broadly marked by his ability to listen and relate to others—along with a sense of natural charisma.[9] Additionally, he effectively presented his hardscrabble, free-wheeling Arkansas hometown of Hot Springs as a unique slice of American society, particularly when it came to racial diversity and social liberalism. His grandparents for example, owned the only store in town that served black and white residents alike, while the city itself touted, "legalized gambling and open prostitution" (Sebold 2008). It may not seem important to delve into the life history of a president to ascertain their competence and success as an executive; however, presidential personality continues to develop and offer new insights concerning the "relationship between personality and public opinion polls, decision-making, and performance in the office" (Sebold 2008). Moreover, this trend did not start with Clinton, it arguably began as far back as Eisenhower, the first President to appear on TV. Personality politics almost certainly played a role in the Nixon-Kennedy debates. Most importantly, these questions about "his [Clinton's] personality are relevant considering the impact it had on the 2008 election" (Sebold 2008).

At this point it is vital to recognize a historical thread that connects all three of these Presidents. Nixon's paranoiac personality contributed to the Watergate debacle—and his own resignation. The incident permanently shifted not only public opinion towards the Executive branch, but also raised the media's inherent skepticism and antagonism towards political figures. As Sebold (2008) discusses, "Journalists raised in the Watergate culture were willing to reveal the scandalous details of a leader's life." Such a culture would later rear its head during Reagan's

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[9] Best shown during a 1992 Presidential Town Hall debate where he quipped to a concerned citizen, "I feel your pain". The remark, in comparison to incumbent Bush, who looked at his watch and discussed interest rates, effectively struck a more empathetic tone.

Iran-Contra Affair, but the Great Communicator deflected various attacks through a kind of built-in defense mechanism—Reagan's inherently delegative leadership style. Of course, in his formal address to the nation, President Reagan said, "My fellow Americans, I've thought long and often about how to explain to you what I intended to accomplish, but I respect you too much to make excuses… I was stubborn in my pursuit of a policy that went astray". The rhetorical trick here lay in Reagan's acknowledgement of personal responsibility, while at the same time covering it with a display of good intentions, of flattery, and with a level of distance. The policy itself, at the core of the controversy, was not under his control, it simply "went astray" (a clever use of the passive voice).

Clinton's rhetorical style and leadership ability can be characterized by an impressive capacity for empathy; however, that same strength can also turn towards pointed manipulation which, when exposed by the limelight, pushes one into a corner of self-defense and personal instability. "Clinton lacks the inability to take responsibility or directly apologize for his mistakes. Instead, Clinton has continually placed the blame elsewhere and, at times like the Lewinsky scandal, actually got angry at his accusers for slandering him" (Sebold 2008). The psychological schema of the SMP can here answer certain questions regarding how and why President Clinton navigated the Lewinsky scandal specifically (and directed his administration generally) in the way he did. In a word, self-made mythology does not equip leaders to deftly handle political crises in the moment; rather, the trope has a dual-view of the past and future. In the heat of battle, the self-made mythos can actually hamper success by bogging down the individual with extraneous questions about legacy, as previously observed (how will I be seen?) or with paralyzing preoccupations with the future (how will this impact next election?). Thus, Clinton's strategy for the Lewinsky scandal mirrored Nixon's—pedantic indecision (look no

further than the Starr Report, wherein the President notably questioned the meaning of the word "is") and publicly perjured himself in a circumstance where silent denial would have been much more effective.

Nevertheless, this self-made crisis of the self-made man did not meaningfully lessen Clinton's political prowess, either amongst the public or as an Executive. He signed the Financial Services Modernization Act of 1999 into law, led NATO forces to prevent ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, and left office with an approval rating of 68 percent, on par with Reagan and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Barack Obama - Prodigal Son of Generational Dreams

In African American thought, the self-made man may very well represent something altogether different, with more human layers of dimension. It seems patently clear that white and black Americans have developed alternative—not competing—notions of the American dream and what it exactly means to be self-made. The self-made idea connotes a certain level of privilege, of not owing anything to the past, not being bogged down in the traditions of one's antecedents. In many ways, it is a philosophy of the present and the future—the past is significant insofar as it provides a dramatic backdrop to the ongoing play of self-fashioning. In a similar way, Frederick Douglass, in his lecture on the self-made man, argued that they, "should be measured, not by the heights others have obtained, but from the depths from which he has come."

Yet, this seems untenable, to rise from the pitch, ashen clouds of a coal mine to the heights of industrial and political prominence, only to maintain a spiritual connection to one's humble origins. The canary will fly forth from the mine and might nest with eagles and dine with hawks, but it will proudly sing with a song filtered through the coal dust that still resides in its

belly. Therefore, SMM does not seek to abandon history per se, but to transcend it. Obama deftly articulates this idea in stating, "That simple notion—that one isn't confined in one's dreams—is so central to our understanding of America that it seems almost commonplace. But in black America, the idea represents a radical break from the past, a severing of the psychological shackles of slavery and Jim Crow" (Obama 2006). This makes it clear that what is being transcended is not the memory of injustice, but the ascription and internalization of harmful racial stereotypes. The "psychological shackles" in this case are entirely more meaningful when paired with the liberatory idea of self-fashioning. To be a self-made man after one's very humanity has been denied for centuries is a matter of the utmost existential importance.

It should be no surprise then, that the proverbial admonition to pull oneself up by one's bootstraps rings rather hollow to some African Americans, who have historically been denied not only the laces and boots, but were forced to labor and manufacture someone else's shoes. Therefore, the self-made man's appeal has limited appeal to certain sectors of the population. In recent years, as social mobility has stagnated and economic inequality has increased, the limitations of self-made mythology are more prevalent than ever. In such a political context, candidates have subverted and criticized the self-made man, pointing out that the methods and tools needed for their ascendence are not intrinsically possessed, but shared in common with the larger populace. In his 2012 reelection campaign, President Obama delivered a speech which cast a more critical eye towards the self-made trope, specifically as it related to the private sector. "Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have allowed you [business executives] to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you've got a business—you didn't build that." At its core, the stump-speech only means to convey that taxpayer contributions—public funds—quite literally pave the way for private investment and

capital growth. This simply admits a plain truth, that far from being alienated from one another, the private and public sector, the CEO and the citizen, the two are constantly engaged with one another. Charitably interpreted, the speech only recognizes the significance of taxpayer dollars while bearing reality down on those captains of industry who—at least in the eyes of some, perhaps in Obama's audience—take sole credit for large-scale accomplishments. Soon after, Republicans quickly took advantage of the linguistic ambiguity in, "you didn't build that", as a disparaging remark against self-made business owners (Miller 2013). Nevertheless, Obama's own critiques of the trope do not mean that he abandoned it; quite the opposite, he embraced it with a new vocabulary that suited the political climate—one defined by corporate greed and a newly empowered voting base amongst the nation's historically disenfranchised. In this way, his own personal experiences as a minority coincide with those members of the electorate who experienced the worst of the Great Recession—not merely the material loss of money or property, but the spiritual grief of an American Dream turned into a nightmare. Obama successfully took this disenchantment, packaged with a populist appeal, and sold it to black and white voters alike, who, unfortunately for him, held competing expectations for the young Senator.

This was the great challenge of Obama's presidency—authenticity amid administrating. Elected in the midst of the Great Recession, the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, he had to offer more than a bail-out to the banks, but deliver, if not a new deal to Americans, then at least substantive policy change to alleviate the hemorrhaging middle-classes and revive hope in the federal government's competence. It is no wonder then, that his 2008 slogan was, "Change We Can Believe In". However, there was a double-concern that Obama faced—a heavy personal and political burden. As the nation's first African American President,

he was charged with leading the black community to new heights, to finally achieve racial and social justice in the nation, long after the best advances of the Civil Rights Movement had stalled out by the 70's. In many ways, his election signaled the beginning of a new era, lending fresh credence—to (some) blacks and whites alike—to the idea of the United States as a "post-race society." However, this undue expectation placed Obama in an irreconcilable situation. How could one man possibly balance the dreams of his people in one hand with the practical political realities of his office? President Obama's predicament highlights a fatal flaw (and strength) within self-made men, especially politicians who take up the term's mantle: you never get sole control over who or what defines you.

Why should this be a strength? I contend that it forces political leaders to recognize a central fact about identity—both as a philosophical idea and as a curated political image—that it is, above all things, fluid. In his 2006 book, *The Audacity of Hope*, which is part autobiography and part political pamphleteering, then-Senator Obama acknowledged the peculiar difficulties of the political life. He states, "on Capitol Hill jokes got screened, irony became suspect, spontaneity was frowned upon, and passion was considered downright dangerous. I started to wonder how long it took for a politician to internalize all this… How long before you started sounding like a politician?" (Obama 74). This process of learning to see oneself through the eyes of the television camera, to hear oneself as a soundbite, amounts to an ironic twist in the modern era of personality politics. The problem of double-consciousness facing African American identity further complicates the matter by adding an intersectional aspect. How can one balance competing perceptions of oneself as a private citizen, a public figure, and as a black man in American society? To succeed in the political sphere, one must refashion one's identity in order to have that same identity stripped away—taking the personality out of personality-based

politics. This is a strength precisely because it levels the playing field—in the political world—one can truly reinvent oneself, can usher in triumphant comebacks (as in the case of Nixon in 1968 or Clinton being dubbed "The Comeback Kid" in 1992). Of course, this is a strength insofar as one attempts to *lean* into it; that is, they do not so much impress their persona upon the public inasmuch as they persuade and play into the mold of leadership that the electorate expects and desires. Successful politicians are not mirrors (leave that to the poets and artists); instead, they are elixirs, photoshop filters, and graceful pictures onto which the public can project their idealized self, their idealized nation. In Obama's case, his greatest campaign achievement was the credence he evoked in America's secret (if desperate) belief in a post-race society. His election represented the consummation of that fantasy.

Conclusion

Self-made mythology is, for better or worse, our national heritage. It defines the American tendency towards innovation, progress, and competition. Like most cultural concepts, it has a dark side; in the case of the United States, the mythology offers political ammunition against social welfare programs, condemning such efforts as "handouts" from the federal government. As the nation's racial reckoning continues, the idea of self-fashioning will have to evolve to accommodate growing calls for restorative justice. Future politicians may very well breathe new life into this idea (and, by extension, the American Dream) by developing a new articulation of what it can mean for everyday Americans. The expansion of charter-schools, policies like school-choice, and the gig-worker economy, favored by conservatives, may be pushed forward with a rhetorical nod towards the self-made myth—promising personal development, free labor, and career advancement. On the progressive side, proposals like a four-day workweek and paid maternity/family leave might be reminiscent of self-made mythology,

but take on a deeper, more spiritual meaning, that of liberating oneself from the marketplace to explore human liberty in more multi-faceted ways. This path, the adept reader might observe, hearkens back to the American philosophical tradition of Transcendentalism. The conservative vision is decidedly more pragmatic in its worldview—another homegrown philosophy.

As it relates back to Nixon, Clinton, and Obama, these men successfully deployed the rhetoric and posturing of self-made mythology throughout their political careers. Their success derives in part from the American people themselves—not in any speech or television appearance. The American people want to believe in the self-made person because within the idea, they see themselves. They look to their leaders as role models—the President, in this sense, is a lodestar for personal identity and (at least during the optimistic fervor of a campaign) an incarnate symbol for all that is possible in America.

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