

Book Review

MYTH AMERICA: Historians Take On the Biggest Legends and Lies About Our Past. By Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, eds. New York: Basic Books. 2023.

The “great enemy of truth is not the lie—deliberate, contrived, and dishonest,” John F. Kennedy said in 1962, “but the myth—persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic.” No single part of American life has been unscathed by widespread lies and myths, but our contemporary moment is exceptional. To understand why, *MYTH AMERICA* brings historical research and analysis to bear on some of the most pervasive falsehoods from the nation’s founding to its recent history, linking their sometimes centuries-long legacies to current political, economic, and social clashes.

Edited by Princeton history professors Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *MYTH AMERICA* is a collection that seeks to confront the “deceptions and distortions” that flowed from the Trump administration, which the editors consider a distinct fact-free source (1). American lies did not begin there, of course. Kruse and Zelizer credit the proliferation of many ahistorical national myths to the emergence of a mighty right-wing media ecosystem and the present-day Republican Party’s submission to it—two related currents that allowed the forty-fifth president and his aides to spew lies unapologetically from the White House.

In 20 concise essays, leading historians of the United States cut through the noise on a diverse set of subjects that have long fueled Americans’ prejudices and antipathies, from insurrection to confederate monuments. Each one is a highly readable and significant addition suitable for undergraduate reading assignments in the vein of the much-used *Keywords* series published by New York University Press. The collection’s themes are also smartly drawn from today’s prominent media headlines and political debates, and their appropriate diversity has already attracted a wide readership for this *New York Times* bestseller.

The collection somewhat follows a chronological historical sweep, starting with David A. Bell on American exceptionalism and Akhil Reed Amar on founding myths, and moves through the civil rights and feminist politics of the twentieth century. One of the most timely and rousing contributions is Carol Anderson's examination of the widespread voter fraud myth and so-called election integrity in the nineteenth century to circumvent the Fifteenth Amendment's ban on racial disenfranchisement. Politicians and operatives from then to now have "camouflaged their discriminatory intent" with "race-neutral language" and spurious calls for honest government, writes Anderson, an Emory University historian (300). She also shows how Americans became accustomed to Republicans' claims of stolen elections in the mid-to-late twentieth century, and thus allowed the voter fraud myth to flourish as an enormous threat to U.S. democracy, such as it is. In another striking essay, Yale historian Elizabeth Hinton argues that violence perpetuated by police more often "inflamed community violence," not the other way around, as generations of U.S. politicians have claimed (238). Hinton historicizes cops' use of tear gas as a primary weapon of community control in the twentieth century, which bipartisan lawmakers saw as a more effective and less harmful weapon than billy clubs and bullets. With more frequency, police turned tear gas—a weapon initially devised for war and colonization—on urban Black communities during and after the 1960s. This American form of riot control, seen recently in the protests following George Floyd's murder, supports the myth that policing is the solution to social problems, Hinton concludes.

Other essays include Erika Lee on immigration, Geraldo Cadava on the U.S.-Mexico border, Lawrence B. Glickman on white backlash, and Daniel Immerwahr on U.S. imperialism. As Kruse and Zelizer note, other damaging myths have and will continue to capture Americans' imaginations and drive their politics. While not mentioned in the text, so-called "stand your ground" laws, which disproportionately endanger Black and brown Americans in public, and attacks on trans people are rooted in similar myths about the nation's racial and social hierarchy. Tragically, many more volumes like MYTH AMERICA will have to be written in the future.

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