Social Education 87 (5)
©2023 National Council for the Social Studies

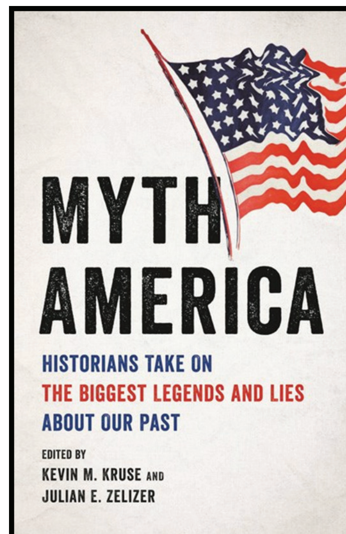
Myth America

Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer (Editors). *Myth America: Historians Take on the Biggest Legends and Lies about our Past*. New York: Basic Books, 2022. 391 pp.

Robert Shaffer

When I taught high school, at each year's first social studies department meeting we each described one thing we did that summer to "brush up on our scholarship"—usually courses, conferences, or books. Today's U.S. history teachers who need to make such a presentation—or who routinely seek out new resources to enhance student learning—will find that *Myth America: Historians Take on the Biggest Legends and Lies about our Past* will recharge their scholarly enthusiasm, enhance their lesson plans, and furnish readings appropriate for classroom use in upper high school grades.

The book's 20 essays critique what the editors and authors (all distinguished historians) consider to be myths or lies about U.S. history propagated by political partisans, some of which have seemingly become conventional wisdom. Editors Kevin Kruse and Julian Zelizer, both at Princeton University, are not shy in attributing the "current war on truth" primarily to "the conservative movement in general and the former Trump administration in particular." They assert that "history that seeks to exalt a nation's strengths without examining its shortcomings, that values feeling good over thinking hard, that embraces simplistic celebration over complex understanding, isn't history; it's propaganda" (4–6). Nevertheless, some historical interpretations popular among liberals or leftists also come under fire.



Many of these brief essays—most are 10 to 15 pages, plus worthwhile footnotes—are drawn from recent books by these authors, providing a kind of Cliff Notes (in a good way) to significant new scholarship. For example, Daniel Immerwahr's "The United States Is an Empire" gets across the main ideas of his wide-ranging *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (2019), and Elizabeth Hinton's examination of "Police Violence" gives a sampling of her exhaustive case studies in *America on Fire: The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion Since the 1960s* (2021). These two chapters also exemplify the different approaches to timeframes: some, like Immerwahr's, sweep across decades or centuries, while others, like Hinton's, intensively analyze a few years and then tie these analyses to present-day (mis)perceptions.

Among the best essays for classroom use are those which focus narrowly on an event or presidential administration, thus providing interpretative supplements to textbooks or other sources. Joshua Zeitz, defining Lyndon Johnson's Great Society broadly to include civil rights legislation, Medicare, Medicaid, and Head Start,

alongside other anti-poverty programs, shows that poverty did, indeed, decline for most demographic groups in the 1960s. The economic problems of the 1970s and later, from inflation and deindustrialization, originated almost entirely from other causes, he concludes—not, as Ronald Reagan and others believed, from these liberal 1960s initiatives. Zelizer, writing on "the Reagan revolution," goes in the opposite direction. Reagan, despite his rhetorical opposition to "the Great Society" and "big government"—one of his first forays into national politics was to warn against Medicare as a first step toward "socialism"—failed to dismantle popular entitlement programs or to cut the size of the federal government as a percentage of gross domestic product. Moreover, despite his get-tough approach to the Soviet Union, Reagan compromised on arms control, demonstrating the impact of the "nuclear freeze" campaign. Zelizer might have said more about the ballooning federal debt and dramatic loss of unionized manufacturing jobs under Reagan's watch.

Eric Rauchway's impassioned defense of the New Deal from attacks by Republican senator Charles Grassley and conservative author Amity Shlaes features an impressive array of statistics and a meditation on the use and misuse of "history" for present-day purposes. (The conventional wisdom that the New Deal failed to end the Great Depression has also been spread by some left-leaning historians and widely-circulated textbooks.) However, Rauchway's prominent inclusion of a four-letter word—although footnoted to a scholarly source—will likely, unfortunately, make teachers reluctant to use this important essay in class.

Most revelatory to me—and deserving of close study in high school Civics classes—is Akhil Reed Amar's debunking of a set of myths about the Constitution's creation. Most importantly, Amar maintains that the founders conceived of their new compact as indissoluble, thus rendering illegitimate from the outset the subsequent secession of Confederate states. Then, in his takedown of Charles Beard's well-known "economic interpretation" of the Constitution, Amar demonstrates that voting for delegates to some state ratifying conventions was open to most white men, and not—as many left-leaning students of history charge—limited to the rich. Amar concludes, corroborating Garry Wills's provocative *"Negro President": Jefferson and the Slave Power* (2003), that the Constitution was "sadly, more skewed toward slavery than many mainstream scholars have been willing to admit" (40), and that it was simultaneously pro-democracy (for whites) and pro-slavery.

Some essays which span wide time periods can provide perspective to teachers as they circle back to an issue at different points in a course. Much of the evidence in Immerwahr's chapter, for example, will appear in a standard course, from territorial government in Western territories to overseas colonies after 1898 to military bases abroad after World War II. Nevertheless, tying them together buttresses his still-controversial contention that the United States, like its European counterparts, is an empire. Natalia Mehlman Petrzela's discussion of the ways in which feminists sought to strengthen families—from crusades against alcoholism to protecting mothers' health through contraception to raising the age of consent in marriage, among other reforms—can help students recognize that attacks on feminism as "anti-family" are oversimplified and often disingenuous.

Michael Kazin's identification of the importance of socialist ideas and individuals highlights an American tradition that has been woefully neglected in our standard curriculum. Addressing the flip side of Kazin's focus, Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway effectively counter the "myth of the marketplace." They show that American economic development consistently depended on government support and intervention, and they provide global examples where capitalism and democracy diverged. (Detailed attention to particular economic theorists will likely limit this essay's classroom use, however.)

David Bell and Sarah Churchwell, respectively, puncture the image of two phrases popular among conservatives: "American exceptionalism" and "America first." Bell argues

that "American exceptionalism" was not widely invoked in the nation until the late twentieth century, and that from the outset it was employed as a rhetorical and political cudgel. (Some current state legislation seeking to direct the content of U.S. history classes, in fact, requires use of the concept of "American exceptionalism," and prohibits material that would seem to cast aspersions on it.) Churchwell, meanwhile, in a fascinating but not wholly convincing discussion, finds that the term "America first" has almost always connoted not merely isolationism in foreign affairs but a conspiratorial world-view and a demand for ethnic purification of this nation's population.

This review cannot summarize every essay, but I will note that several contain insights valuable for teachers even as the brief essay format leaves gaps in argument or evidence. These include Erika Lee's broadside against characterizations of immigration as an "invasion"; Geraldo Cadova's reconceptualization of the border with Mexico as a zone not mainly of fear and hostility but of trade and interchange; Ari Kelman's insistence, against the assumptions of many racists and liberals alike, that American Indians have not "vanished" but have persisted in our society; and Karen Cox's timely demonstration that racist "Lost Cause" ideology underlay the construction of Confederate monuments. Carol Anderson usefully counterposes the practice over many decades of active voter suppression against minority urban groups with the myth of widespread individual voter fraud, although she ignores here the history of electoral manipulation by political party machines.

Kruse, in the book's longest essay, meticulously documents the often blatantly racist and very successful Republican appeals from 1948 on to induce white Southern Democrats to switch parties, though I am not convinced that this exposition challenges any widely-held "myth." Lawrence Glickman critically examines the idea that a "white backlash" emerged only against the "Black Power" phase of the civil right movement, but some readers may be dissatisfied, as I was, with the framing of his argument around cause and effect. Glenda Gilmore, addressing a similar topic, more successfully argues that the myth of "The Good Protest"—the nonviolent phase of the Southern civil rights movement—obscures the longer history of Black protest, overstates the movement's popularity among whites at the time, and exaggerates its successes. Gilmore, like Glickman and Kazin, reminds readers of Martin Luther King Jr.'s radicalism, including his outspokenness against police violence in the North—a side of King that students should know.

This volume does not grapple with all popular myths about American history. It omits, for example, the alleged founding of the United States as a "Christian nation." Nor do the essays consistently address the issues from early American history raised by Nikole Hannah-Jones in the controversial 1619 Project (though several examine systemic racism after slavery's end). No single book can cover everything. But *Myth America* will help social studies teachers not only "brush up on our scholarship" but consider how many Americans—perhaps including our students and their parents—perceive our nation's history and how perceptions of this past affect the present.

Robert Shaffer is Professor Emeritus of History at Shippensburg University, where he also taught social studies education. He is a frequent contributor to *Social Education*.