American Mythology

This is a brief commentary published in [Sojourners](#) in September 2004. It's a look at some of the reasons we Americans might have been willing to believe so many of the false rationales given for our invasion of Iraq, specifically, the willingness of most human beings to scapegoat others.

In the spring of 2004, one year after the beginning of the war in Iraq, several national polls painted a stark portrait of an American public deceived. Absolute majorities of Americans believed that

-       Iraq provided substantial support to al-Qaeda before the Iraq war (including 20% who believed that Iraq   *participated* in the 9/11 attacks);
-       Iraq had weapons of mass destruction or an active WMD program just prior to the war;

-       Iraq posed an immediate threat to the safety of the United States;
-       most other nations supported the US position in Iraq; and
-       the Iraq insurgency comprised almost entirely foreign and fringe elements.

Political support for President Bush was directly tied to these myths: People who believed them tended to support the president; others did not. Were the American people to believe only what is demonstrably true, it seems, President Bush would not be re-elected.

Why do so many Americans believe what can be easily and irrefutably shown to be false? While one can well point to the administration's manipulation of the media, to the power of the conservative media itself and its "news by sound bite," or to general American ignorance, there are more fundamental reasons why we accept these myths.

In developing a theory of the origins of violence and culture, French intellectual René Girard discovered that in order to manage the violence and instability that arise within them, all societies blame (and then sacrifice) arbitrarily chosen scapegoats, a process that generates the needed social solidarity among those remaining. In other words, cultures keep the peace by projecting their evil onto specific individuals or groups, dividing the world in good and evil, and expelling (or killing) the "evil ones." This scapegoating violence can be as awful as the Holocaust or as banal as children excluding a playmate for the day.

But this scapegoating mechanism only generates its group cohesion successfully if the true nature of the process remains hidden.

Girard discovered that societies intuitively develop myths to cover up their arbitrary choices and maintain their solidarity. The Salem community believed that the women burned at the stake were "witches" who had brought evil to the community. European settlers in America believed that the native peoples were savages in a recently "discovered" and "empty" land justifying their slaughter. To an outsider to the culture, the scapegoating is obvious, but to those caught within the society's sacrificial myths, the scapegoating mechanism remains hidden.

Wars frequently generate such social solidarity. Before the 1991 Gulf War, the country was almost equally divided on the wisdom of the war. After hostilities commenced, however, approval was over 90%. Once the myth has taken over and group solidarity has formed, challenging it is tantamount to betrayal.

The current deceptions around Iraq, in other words, are part of a powerful myth-making process human beings are particularly prone to. For millennia, cultures have depended on this human capacity to deceive themselves.

The implications are several. First, just pointing out the truth—showing people that they are being deceived—will have only a marginal effect in the short run. Historically, at least, the truth has been no obstacle to the myth-making mechanism.

Second, these particular myths about the Iraq war are rooted in more essential underlying myths about who we are and what we deserve. For example, capitalism's myth of a level playing field justifies a highly unequal society. Our national myth of good intentions toward the rest of the world grants us license for dangerous international unilateralism. Technology's mythologically infinite capacity lulls us as we irreversibly despoil the earth's resources. Challenging these myths challenges the American way of life.

Third, the underlying myths become elements of our spirituality. They inform our relationship to our deeper selves and to the meaning we find in life. The environmental, anti-globalization,

and anti-war movements, then, are the forerunners of an entire spiritual reorientation necessary if America is to survive.

The mythology around the Iraq war points to the crucial spiritual question for the day: Do we try to save ourselves by scapegoating the Other or do we lose ourselves by acknowledging our own complicity and embracing the Other in love and forgiveness?