

Toward New Myth

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IN 1982, in a lead article of *Foreign Affairs* entitled "The Care and Repair of Public Myth," historian William H. McNeill focused attention on the inadequate response academic historians, preoccupied with the "revisionist" debunking of old myths, were making to the loss of culturewide belief: "A people without a full quiver of relevant agreed-upon statements, accepted in advance through education or less formalized acculturation, soon finds itself in deep trouble, for, in the absence of believable myths, coherent public action becomes very difficult to improvise or sustain." Without specifically referring to Vietnam, McNeill argued that the diminishing wealth and power of the United States since 1945 should stimulate "thoughtful men of letters" to provide a modified myth that could replace "both the original Puritan vision of creating a 'city on the hill' uniquely pleasing to God, and its variously secularized versions that continue to dominate our national self-image."¹

McNeill's article addressed a growing concern among intellectuals and other commentators in the early 1980s that Americans were moving incoherently into the future from a past they no longer found intelligible. In the last summer of the doomed Carter administration, *Time* ran a six-page cover story by Lance Morrow on American history and myth that deplored the "millennial chill" that since Vietnam had taken hold of the American psyche, concluding that "The nation, like the profession of history, needs someone with the intellectual power to devise a new

myth or revive the old." A year and a half later, historian C. Vann Woodward wrote in the *New Republic* of how a myth of collective guilt had resulted from the Vietnam experience:

Still draped in legends of national infancy, myths of innocence, success, invincibility, and righteousness . . . we were caught short a decade or more ago at the climax of our own mythic national pretensions and exposed in deeds and failures that mocked all the old myths. It was then that the obsession with guilt took hold.

Woodward deplored as equally simplistic the revisionist interpreters of American history and President Reagan's and pollsters' assertions that "Americans have made a sudden recovery from their malaise, restored their self-esteem and self-confidence, and now face the future and a skeptical world with old-time assurance." Both of these extremes suggested to Woodward that Americans were proving unable to move beyond their deeply embedded concept of the national character as a new Adam, with the result that the national psyche continued to oscillate between self-perceptions of unique innocence or unique evil. A few months later in the conservative *National Review*, Charles Burton Marshall rejected President Reagan's and Norman Podhoretz's recent claims that Vietnam had been "a noble cause," pointing out that they were ignoring the hubris of an American leadership that had never doubted "the susceptibility of remote realities to U.S. designs." Explaining that "hubris includes the assumption of having luck on one's side," and noting that Podhoretz's *Why We Were in Vietnam* traced the consistent dependence of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon upon luck in their Vietnam policies rather than upon calculated strategic assessment, he concluded that America's discovery that it was no longer lucky was "hard for the nation to get used to."²

"Getting used to" moving through the perils of time without the assurance of luck, without the conviction of a