

John McCain as Metaphoric Myth. “Wasn’t it Great to Kill Millions of Vietnamese and Iraqis?”

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“Every notion of progress is refuted by the existence of the Iliad.” – Roberto Calasso, The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony

“The spectacle is the nightmare of imprisoned modern society which ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of sleep.” – Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle

It’s still the same old story. The best propaganda places individual stories within a larger framework. The individual is extolled or damned in the service of the controlling myth.

Senator John McCain is a case in point. As an individual, he is not important, except as the glorified stories about him and his own confabulations about himself can be used to enhance the controlling myth. American history is replete with such bloodthirsty, war-mongering individuals, whose lives and stories serve to enhance the American myth of being “God’s New Israel” and Americans being God’s chosen people whose mission is to spread “freedom” and “democracy” around the world with our “terrible swift swords.”

As Bob Dylan put it,

“But I learned to accept it/Accept it with pride/For you don’t count the dead/When God’s on your side.”

Myths are the invisible narrative skeletons of our outward lives. They are limited in number and keep getting reused in different forms. All we do hangs upon their bones. This is true for nations and for individuals. Myths are what people take for granted and do not question. Our lives are telling stories, and myth means story.

We tell our lives by living stories. Then others tell those stories about us when we are dead.

Of course, some control freaks try to manage their myths from the grave, as did McCain, who knew how the game is played, and who got his brothers-in-arms, George W. Bush and Barack Obama to polish his myth as he lay silent before them.

“We Lost a Good One,” blared the New York Times, as McCain was lying in state, and liars of state, Bush and Obama, were preparing to shill for him as they shilled for war and the overthrow of foreign governments for their masters. Another member of the Club, Joseph

Biden, had done his part in the mythologizing a few days earlier when he shed his famous “regular guy” tears as he spoke of his dear friend. For those outside such a small circle of friends – the millions of passive TV spectators in the society of the spectacle – tears seal the deal, set the myth into an emotional space that just feels right. In mythmaking, feeling is all; facts don’t matter. And the military and religious symbolism, the pageantry and the majesty of the setting, make the eulogies resound more loudly.

It is through symbols, not just words, that the “people” are brought together to celebrate their mythic uniqueness, for the word symbol comes from the Greek, meaning to throw together, and for the in-crowd that is what they do. We are in this together, one nation under God....while outside, as McCain, Bush, Obama, et al. never failed to remind us “folks,” there lurks the diabolic (to throw apart) devils from Iraq, Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, Russia, etc. ready to divide us from within and attack us from without. We are the good “insiders,” they are the evil “outsiders.” Such verbiage constitutes the essence of cultural myth creation and the core of American Exceptionalism. It is practiced by the politicians and mainstream corporate media every day.

In speaking about McCain, Bush and Obama did so from within the frame of this great American Myth of Exceptionalism and God’s Chosen People. McCain, who is a small piece of a much larger myth, was just another name added to the Pantheon. Bush once said, “Like generations before us, we have a calling from beyond the stars to stand for freedom.” And Obama once confessed, “I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being.” One can easily understand why McCain chose them.

Bush eulogized McCain thus:

“In one epic life was written the courage and greatness of our country.”

Wasn’t it great to kill millions of Vietnamese and Iraqis? Only the courageous from the home of the brave can perform such honorable duties, especially from the air.

“He respected the dignity inherent in every life, a dignity that does not stop at borders and cannot be erased by dictators,” said Bush, adding:

Whatever the cause, it was this combination of courage and decency that defined John’s calling, and so closely paralleled the calling of his country. It’s this combination of courage and decency that makes the American military something new in history, an unrivaled power for good.”

Moreover, Obama intoned with such eloquence:

And finally while John and I disagreed on all kinds of foreign policy issues, we stood together on America’s role as the one nation, believing that with great power and great blessings comes great responsibility...But John understood that our security and our influence was won not just by our military might, not just by our wealth, not just by our ability to bend others to our will, but from our capacity to inspire others with our adherence to a set of universal values. Like rule of law and human rights and insistence on the God-given dignity of every human being.

Now I wonder what John's and Barack's dead victims in Libya and Syria would have to say about their "universal values" and respect for the "rule of law"? Can the dead laugh sardonically?

The recent spectacle over John McCain's death is a perfect example of myth creation. McCain is, however, a metaphor for the larger ongoing narrative that has been going on for centuries and seems to have no end.

McCain's apotheosis is a made for TV American hero movie, one that he first helped create and one that John Wayne would envy, as blatantly jingoistic and racist as Wayne was in "The Green Berets," a movie released in 1968, the year after our hero McCain's dubious involvement in the tragedy of the USS Forrestal aircraft carrier that killed 137 sailors, his being shot down while bombing North Viet Nam, and his subsequent years in captivity. No doubt Sydney Schanberg's devastating expose of McCain's explanation of his years as a POW will play no part in today's mythologizing.

If only Wilfred Owen's words could have been piped into the National Cathedral during the funeral ceremony, maybe the mythmaking would have ceased and truth revealed.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

But that is wishful thinking in this land of make-believe, where such poetic obscenities are not allowed in the Cathedral of God's People.

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