



Rough-hewn Men: Log Cabin Mythology in Presidential Autobiography

1. Introduction

Publishers are apparently compelled to publish presidential autobiography, I assume, because of the prestige in being known as a president's publisher. The public seems indifferent to them; most are money losers.¹ Presidential autobiography is particularly interesting, despite the lack of commercial popularity, because within the office and the man we see embodied one of the essential conflicts of America. In one person Americans embody the head of government and the head of state. These roles often conflict because individuals may disagree with the actions of the head of government while they support, even revere, the symbol of president as head of state. This inherent conflict makes presidential autobiography, such as Ronald Reagan's *An American Life* or Bill Clinton's *My Life*, doubly troubling. Readers may expect these texts to display a high regard for facts. But a presidential autobiography, like any autobiography, is more than a sorting out of historical events. Autobiography complicates our notions of facts and the public record. Further, autobiography is, as William Berry claims, a "narcissistic enterprise" in which the subject gazes inward and "discovers a landscape of surpassing depth and beauty."² This is a fanciful expression of the desire to make one's inner life and thoughts known and the concomitant desire of the readers to tap into those inner thoughts. I would argue that we look to presidential autobiography to celebrate the public record of the head of state while hoping it will reveal the inner person behind the public policy, the head of government, thus illuminating and, possibly, unifying them.

This illumination and unification becomes plausible in an ex-president's autobiography because it is, or at least is thought to be, unmediated by news organizations, pundits, and

political aides. In the public record, the president is head of government--what policies he supported, what victories he won, what results he achieved or failed to achieve. But it is within the context of America's myths, and the related stories a president tells about himself, that he creates, rather than reveals, the man who was head of state. I think Americans desire this creation because their national myths are the narratives of their national symbols, and the president is a national symbol incarnate linked to a history of famous man-symbols. The American head of state should be honest because as a boy George Washington supposedly chopped down a cherry tree and told his father the truth about the deed. The American head of government should be a man of the people because Andrew "Old Hickory" Jackson was supposedly born in a log cabin. The American head of state should be eloquent because Lincoln supposedly composed the Gettysburg address on the back of an envelope. The myths an ex-president uses are the narrative vehicles that help blur the distinction between president as head of government and president as head of state--allowing the ex-president in retirement to become one person (at least within the context of the narrative, if not within the context of history or politics).

In this essay I will examine a myth nearly as old as the presidency -- the log cabin myth, which argues that any American may rise from humble roots (e.g. having been born in a log cabin) to any station in life on the strength of his or her abilities, ambition, and heroics. I will focus on the use of this myth in recent presidential autobiographies--from Reagan, Bush, and Clinton--and argue that the log cabin myth must be challenged as false. While stories about chopping down cherry trees may be harmless enough, the log cabin myth makes another argument, an ideological and common-sense argument: That people fail to rise above circumstances owing to their own lack of ability, ambition and heroics.

2. The Log Cabin Myth

Certainly, the American epic is full of such vignettes. But, as Edward Pessen argues, this myth is one of our most enduring and erroneous. Pessen demonstrates that most of America's presidents -- Washington through Reagan -- were born to the upper classes. Only a handful reached the presidency from the middle classes. And only four can reasonably claim the log cabin mythology as truth: Millard Fillmore, Andrew Johnson, James Garfield, and Richard Nixon. Only Andrew Johnson was born into what Pessen classifies as the upper lower class. No one has reached the presidency from poverty.³ Yet, nearly every president since Jackson has made specific claims to rising from humble origins as self-made men. The inauguration of Jackson in 1829 is commonly thought to have ushered a new political era of vigorous, grassroots democracy. Jackson, however, was no common man. He was an aristocrat like the presidents before him. But, as Max Skidmore demonstrates, Jackson had "the talent and the personality to ride the wave that many historians, in somewhat exaggerated fashion, have interpreted as beginning the era of the 'common man'."⁴ The log cabin myth -- reality for so many in a frontier nation -- captured the American political imagination in the early 19th century. Pessen explains:

It is true that during the new age of demagoguery that was ushered in with Jackson's election,... well-to-do candidates...began shamelessly to plead poverty and humble origins, under the evident conviction that voters would respond favorably to men of such background.⁵

Pessen further claims that the "incessant poor-mouthing of their boyhoods by rich and successful Americans testifies to their awareness of the political capital that can be derived from humble beginnings."⁶

I accept Norman Fairclough's view that "there is not an external relationship 'between' language and society, but an internal and dialectical relationship" --that linguistic phenomena are social phenomena and vice versa.⁷ I make the same claim about rhetorical phenomena, such as employing narrative to make political arguments. Fairclough demonstrates that practices

which appear to be universal and common sensical can often be shown to originate in the dominant class or the dominant bloc, and to have become naturalized....Ideological power, the power to project one's practices as universal and "common sense," is a significant complement to economic and political power.⁸

Further, Aristotle and Isocrates add some interesting theoretical insight into how the log cabin myth works rhetorically. Its use by well-heeled men, rather than rough-hewn men, intentionally blurs the boundary between situated and invented ethos. Among the artistic proofs classified by Aristotle, ethos should demonstrate the moral competence of the writer, and it should emerge in the text -- an *invented* ethos. While not as important for Aristotle, Isocrates argued that the ethical appeal should also include an understanding of who the writer is before the delivery of a text -- a *situated* ethos. The log cabin myth, then, is invented situated ethos. Propaganda, however, might be the most accurate term for the myth's articulation in presidential autobiography.

3. The Myth of Ronald Reagan

Depending on the critic, Reagan's autobiography is either a vacuous account of an unreflective man who stumbled into the ultimate American success, or it is the portrait of one of the century's most able politicians. For example, Bert Rockman, reviewing the text for

Political Science Quarterly, concludes that Reagan as president was “a man of exceedingly limited range and curiosity.”⁹ But, John O’Sullivan, writing in *The National Review*, comes to a very different conclusion:

Mr. Reagan, then, is a somewhat different political leader from the bumbling idiot of liberal myth--in private a kind and gentle man, in politics a charming Machiavellian, economical in his use of power, manipulative in his use of people, and modest when it comes to sharing credit. In short, a master politician.¹⁰

On the surface this merely tells us that, possibly for political reasons, the scholar and the editorialist disagree. I will resist O’Sullivan’s apparent definition of myth as mere falsehood and forward the idea that myths, while often not factual, are indeed truthful. They are truthful in the sense that the lies, fabrications, distortions, and fantasies a president creates about himself are as revealing as the facts.

Reagan creates a critical/political quagmire even before the opening paragraph of *An American Life*. How might we view this text differently if the title had incorporated the definite article instead of the indefinite article? If the topic of discussion is “the” American life, that suggests achievement of an ideal that stands above all other achievements in the American context. The president is the head of government and the head of state, and, because of America’s position as the world’s lone “superpower,” the president is popularly called the leader of the free world. “The” would seem the proper choice in this context. Reagan’s title plays into the log-cabin myth; indeed the title sells it before the reader ever cracks the cover. And the reader is not disappointed because Reagan portrays himself as springing from a humble background to achieve the American dream. As Hertzberg explains:

On the surface is the golden personification of the American dream: the small-town lifeguard who saved seventy-seven people from drowning, the movie star who saved the girl and the day in many a B picture, the citizen-politician who saved the conservative movement from sullen irrelevance, the triumphal president who saved his country from drift and decline.¹¹

Reagan opens the book with a 5-page prologue about meeting Mikhail Gorbachev for the first time. But the first line of the first chapter begins the rags-to-riches story: “If I’d gotten the job I wanted at Montgomery Ward, I suppose I would never have left Illinois.”¹² Interestingly, he complicates the myth by ascribing his extraordinary results to two distinctly different causes. First, he claims that “God has a plan for everyone and that seemingly random twists of fate are all a part of His plan.” Two pages later he claims that “all men and women, regardless of their color or religion, are created equal and that individuals determine their own destiny; that is, it’s largely their own ambition and hard work that determine their fate in life.”¹³ Page after page in the opening chapters tell the story of the local boy of humble roots who is destined to make good on the American Dream. Reagan sells it with an “aw-shucks” attitude throughout: “Later in life I learned that, compared with some of the other folks who lived in Dixon, our family was ‘poor.’”¹⁴

Pessen begs to differ. Reagan’s father kept the family living a comfortable middle-class lifestyle in Illinois. He became a project manager for the Work Projects Administration in Dixon. As Pessen argues, government programs to help the poor are not usually put under the direction of the poor themselves. Further, Reagan’s mother regularly volunteered for several ladies’ societies and worked at aiding local indigents and inmates. While Reagan certainly did not grow up in the upper classes, he did enjoy one hallmark of most who achieve economic and political success in America: access to a good education.¹⁵

4. George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton

George H. W. Bush presents an interesting anomaly. He did not write an autobiography. He did however publish a book of letters following the publication of *Barbara Bush: A Memoir* by his wife and *A World Transformed*, a political book co-authored with Brent Scowcroft. In *All the Best*, his book of published letters, Bush writes: “I felt these two books ‘got it right’ both on perceptions of the Bushes as a family and on how my administration tried to handle the foreign-policy problems we faced.” But he was convinced by an editor to publish a compilation of letters and diary entries to produce “a book giving a deeper insight into what my own heartbeat is, what my values are, what motivated me in life.” Bush makes no attempt to characterize his socio-economic status.¹⁶ Claiming a humble origin would have simply been absurd in his case given the public record.

My Life, by Bill Clinton, returns to the log cabin myth--especially evident in the slightly tawdry stories Clinton tells about his family in the opening chapters. He begins a short paragraph in the second chapter this way: “Social life in my extended family, like that of most people of modest means who grew up in the country, revolved around meals, conversation, and storytelling.”¹⁷ This not only signals the use of the myth, but also gives us some insight into Clinton’s numerous narrative digressions.

From the evidence offered in *My Life*, Clinton probably spent most of his youth solidly in the middle class. Education is key to understanding this. He spent some of his primary school years in a private Catholic school. He attended Georgetown University and Oxford. Clinton understood the rhetorical power of a good story, as he says early in his book: “Later, when I got into politics, being able to say I had lived on a farm with an outhouse made a great story, almost as good as being born in a log cabin.”¹⁸

5. Barack Obama and John McCain

The log cabin myth played an interesting role in the 2008 presidential campaign. John McCain could not claim humble roots and did not try to do so. He is the son and grandson of Navy Admirals and a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy. Instead, he accentuated service to country as his legacy.¹⁹

Barack Obama, on the other hand, let the myth play a subtle role. From his biography on his official campaign website entitled *Meet Barack: The Early Years*:

Barack Obama was born in Hawaii on August 4th, 1961. His father, Barack Obama Sr., was born and raised in a small village in Kenya, where he grew up herding goats with his own father, who was a domestic servant to the British. Barack's mother, Ann Dunham, grew up in small-town Kansas. Her father worked on oil rigs during the Depression, and then signed up for World War II after Pearl Harbor, where he marched across Europe in Patton's army. Her mother went to work on a bomber assembly line, and after the war, they studied on the G.I. Bill, bought a house through the Federal Housing Program, and moved west to Hawaii.²⁰

This part sets the tone with the log cabin myth. But the truly humble in origin will have a difficult time recognizing what follows:

It was there, at the University of Hawaii, where Barack's parents met. His mother was a student there, and his father had won a scholarship that allowed him to leave Kenya and pursue his dreams in America. Barack's father eventually returned to Kenya, and

Barack grew up with his mother in Hawaii, and for a few years in Indonesia. Later, he moved to New York, where he graduated from Columbia University in 1983.²¹

Balee suggests that American autobiographers in general have had a dual task: “constructing themselves and building a national identity.”²² And for an ex-president, this dual construction ought to require fidelity to the yellow press clippings of public record where we popularly assume is written the first rough draft of history and the daily record of our national identity. The model for the American autobiography, she argues, the one that clearly shows an American constructing self and national identity, is *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* precisely because it creates the myth of the self-made man in conjunction with an emerging (self-making) country. As Balee explains:

Franklin’s autobiography not only outlived him by hundreds of years, it provided the template of the American dream as it would continue to be imagined until midway through the twentieth century. The rags-to-riches tale of the self-made man which Franklin originated in his autobiography has become a staple of American literature, both in fiction and nonfiction. In fact, revealing the secret of his material success is the reason Franklin gives for this book at all.²³

The American autobiography, as Balee suggests, is the narrative of personal and national success told mostly in material terms. For ex-presidents, the material becomes the political but the movement from humbleness to notoriety (political success) remains the same.

Berry's thinking mirrors Balee's in that they both see within American autobiography the dual idea of self and national construction. As Berry claims:

American autobiography has been political and didactic, inextricably tied to and expressive of what the country meant to the people who were making it. That stemmed in part from the very nature of autobiography. It presents in vivid, individual terms images of particular communities, ideal and otherwise.²⁴

Berry concludes that, since Franklin, American autobiographers have mostly identified with America for some fundamental idea(s) commonly thought to be American. This identification "supplies the basic theme and narrative shape of personal writing," and so the autobiography tends to celebrate the ideal and rarely to "denunciate" it.²⁵

It is certainly all right to have been born in a log cabin (humble beginnings), but it is certainly not all right to remain in that condition. The myth demands that we employ ability, ambition, and heroism to rise above our beginnings. We employ these as individuals. That is the lesson and the persuasive intention of the log cabin myth. Why does it persist in presidential autobiography long after its usefulness in election campaigns? It persists because it is a useful ideology -- a common-sense assumption -- that springs from the politically and economically powerful to explain and justify their power and wealth.

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- ¹ Michael Korda. "Promoting the President." *The New Yorker*. (6 Oct. 1997): 88-95.
- ² William Berry "Personal Politics: American Autobiography." *The Virginia Quarterly* 73 (1997): 610.
- ³ Edward Pessen. *The Log Cabin Myth: The Social Backgrounds of the Presidents*. (New Haven: Yale University Press. 1984) 16.
- ⁴ Max Skidmore. *Legacy to the World: A Study of America's Political Ideas*. (New York: Peter Lang. 1998) 130.
- ⁵ Pessen, 16.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 171.
- ⁷ Norman Fairlough. *Language and Power*. (London: Longman. 1989) 23.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.
- ⁹ Bert Rockman. "Book Reviews." *Political Science Quarterly* 106 (1991): 717.
- ¹⁰ John O'Sullivan. "No Great Mystery." *National Review*. (11 Feb. 1991): 48.
- ¹¹ Hendrick Hertzberg. "The Child Monarch." *The New Republic*. (9 Sept. 1991): 27.
- ¹² Ronald Reagan. *An American Life*. (New York: Simon. 1990) 3.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 20-21.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.
- ¹⁵ Pessen, 53.
- ¹⁶ George H. W. Bush. *All the Best*. (New York: Scribner. 1999) 21.
- ¹⁷ Bill Clinton. *My Life*. (New York: Knopf. 2004) 14.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.
- ¹⁹ *About John McCain: Ready From Day One*. Online. <http://www.johnmccain.com>. 12 June 2008.
- ²⁰ *Meet Barack: The Early Years*. (2008) Online. <http://www.barackobama.com>. 12 June 2008.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² Susan Balee. "From the Outside in: A History of American Autobiography." *The Hudson Review* 51, (1998): 40.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 55-56.
- ²⁴ Berry, 610.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 616.