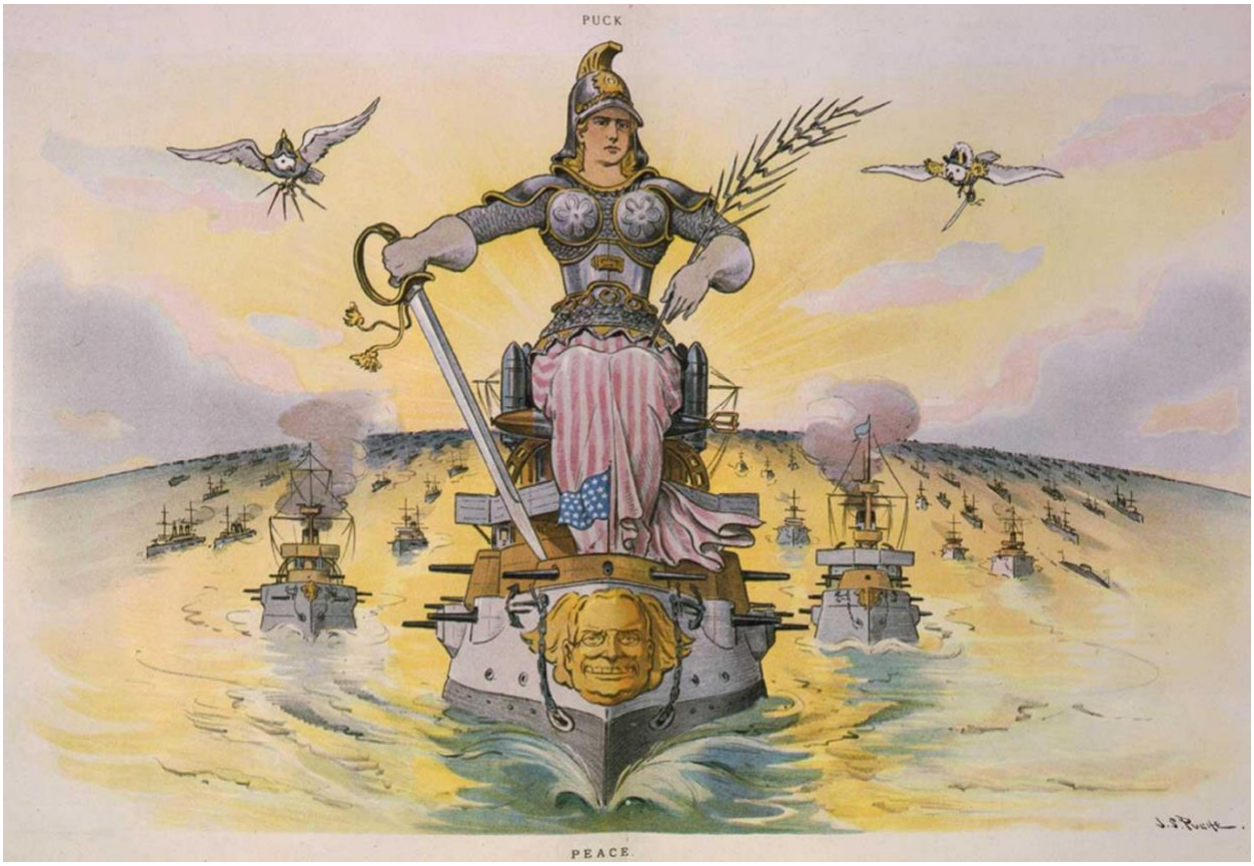

Figure 1 J.S. Pughe, Peace, 1905 Illustration shows a flotilla of ships with Theodore Roosevelt's face on the lead ship; the figure of Peace, wearing armor and carrying a sword in one hand and an olive branch fashioned out of bayonets in the other, is sitting atop this ship. Two doves flying by her side are armed and wearing armor.

The Myth of the Frontier

The Archetype of Rebirth in an American Cultural Complex

Kaitryn Wertz

> "The psychologist cannot avoid coming to grips with contemporary history, even if his soul shrinks from the political uproar, the lying propaganda and the jarring speeches of demagogues. We need not mention his duties as a citizen, which confront him with a similar task." C.G. Jung, 1964

The impact of the MAGA movement on American collective consciousness has polarized the populace with extremism and intense emotion. The heart of MAGA ideology is fear and demonization of the other — the immigrant, the person of color, the individual who doesn't conform to traditional American norms of religion or gender expression. These must be eliminated so that "real Americans" can regenerate an imagined golden age. This is but the latest iteration of America's oldest story, the myth of the Frontier, a potent psychological story that that has set American armies marching from the Puritan colonies to Afghanistan, wreaking devastation on those regarded as 'other' for four hundred years.

Figure 2 MAGA supporters dressed as cowboys.

The complex social, economic, historical and religious factors that have contributed to the MAGA movement cannot be reduced to a single psychological formulation. However, a Jungian reflection on possible developments in the inner world of the American psyche may contribute to our understanding. From that perspective, the America's collective consciousness is in the grip of a cultural complex. Singer and Kimbles' (2004) extension of Jung's theory of complexes to include the cultural complex provides a helpful lens through which to view current events. To summarize their work in brief, cultural complexes can be thought of as arising from a cultural layer of the unconscious, in interaction with both the archetypal and personal layers of the psyche.

Like individual complexes, cultural complexes form around an archetypal pattern and tend to be autonomous, repetitive and resistant to consciousness, accruing experiences that confirm their historical point of view. Cultural complexes tend to be bipolar. When they are activated, the group or individual identifies with one pole of the complex while the other pole is projected. An activated cultural complex is characterized (and most easily recognized) by intense emotion. According to Singer and Kimbles, "Cultural complexes provide those caught in their potent web of stories and emotions a simplistic certainty about the group's place in the world in the face of otherwise conflicting and ambiguous uncertainties." (ibid, p. 21).

The popular literature and film of a culture can reveal the nature of activated cultural complexes and depict a myth-making function. In his seminal study of American literature, cultural historian Richard Slotkin (1973, 1985, and 1998) traces "the myth of

the Frontier." Slotkin understands myth as "a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling narratives" (1973, p. 6).

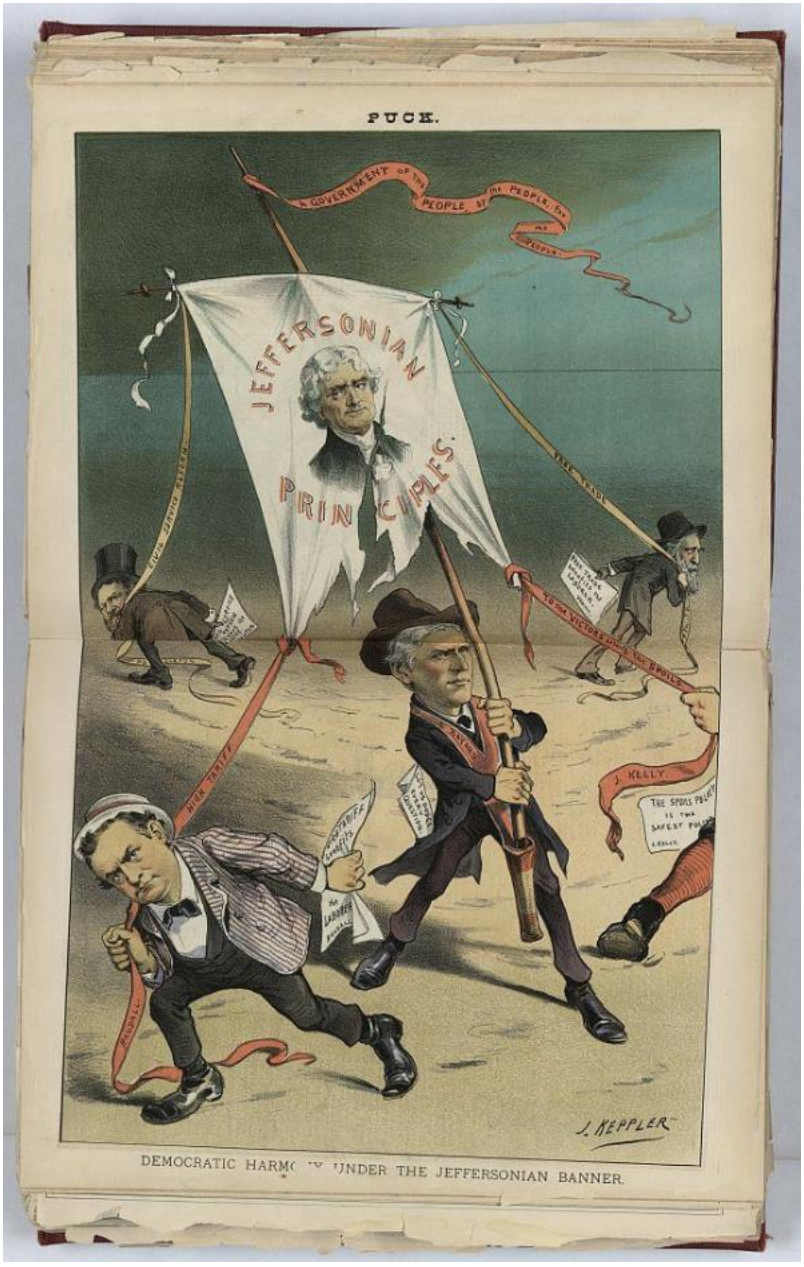

Figure 3 Political Cartoon, Joseph Keppler, 1833

According to Slotkin, the myth of the Frontier imagines America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, self-reliant individual to thrust his (and it is his) way to wealth and power. While the heroic quest is an underlying archetypal motif for this myth, in American culture the pattern assumed a distinct form. Slotkin writes:

> (The Founders) … believed in the immanence of a rational republic of yeoman farmers and enlightened leaders, living amicably in the light of natural law and the Constitution. They were thereby left unprepared when the Jeffersonian republic was overcome by the Jacksonian democracy of the western man-on-the-make, the speculator and the wildcat banker…when racist irrationalism and a falsely conceived economics prolonged and intensified slavery in the teeth of American democratic idealism…

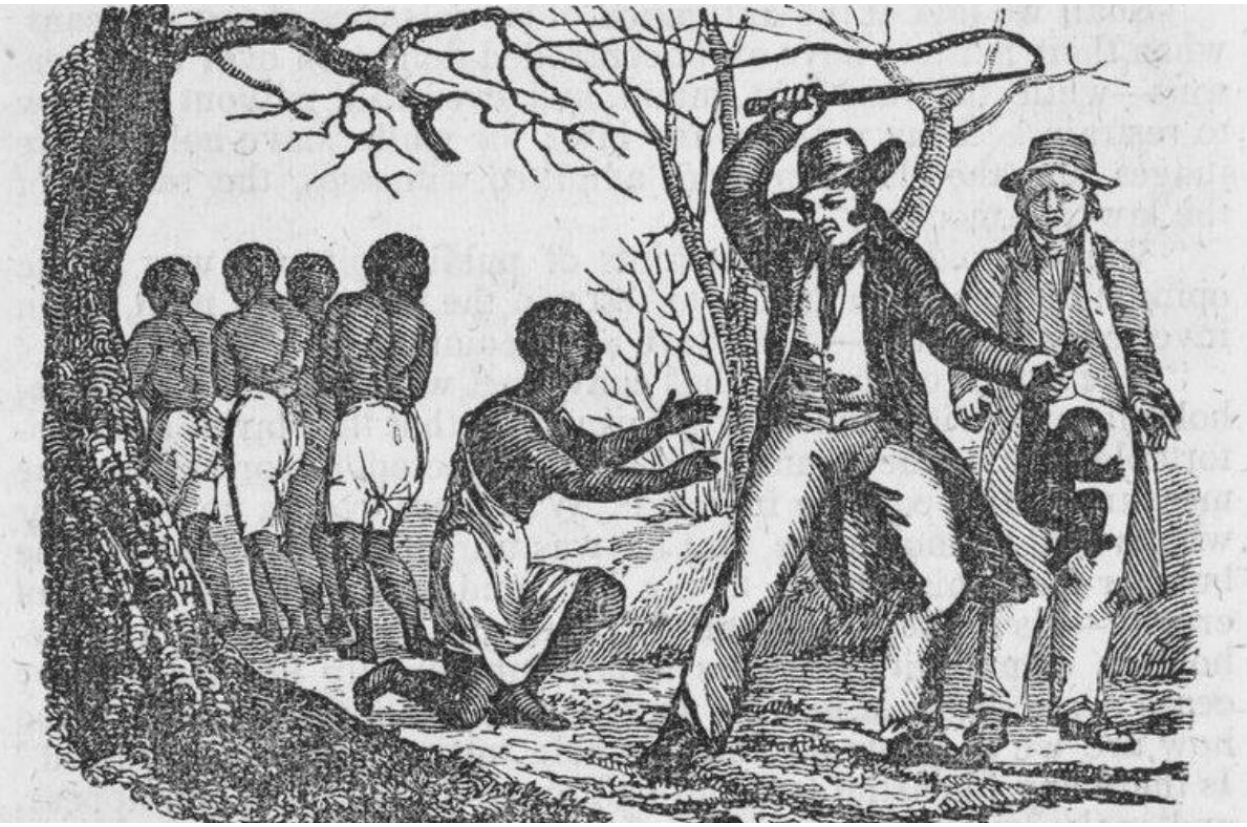

Figure 4 "Cruelties of Slavery", Artist unknown, c. 1835.

…and when men like Davy Crockett became national heroes by defining national aspiration in terms of so many bears destroyed, so much land preempted, so many trees hacked down, so many Indians and Mexicans dead in the dust….The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to regeneration ultimately became the means of violence and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of American experience. (1973, p.5)

Figure 5 "Daniel Boone Kills a Bear". 1840, Artist unknown.

The frontier has been and remains a particularly vivid image of regeneration and rebirth. Even before European settlement, the English, French and Spanish widely romanticized America as a new Garden of Eden, a vacant, unspoiled land, ordained for them by God, where colonizers could renew their physical and moral vigor.

Figure 6 "Allegory of America", circa 1615, engraving by Jan Galle. The scene depicts Amerigo Vespucci representing the Old World as he awakens a Native American from her slumber. In the background, natives partake in a cannibalistic feast.

The English Puritans exemplified this attitude, viewing their voyage to the New World as a spiritual journey of rebirth. They considered the indigenous people they encountered to be personifications of the temptation to sin, whose conversion (or elimination) was a God-given test. As successive floods of colonizers demanded ever-increasing territory, religion provided the justification for a policy of extermination. In

psychological language, we might view this as the birth of a distinctly American cultural complex.

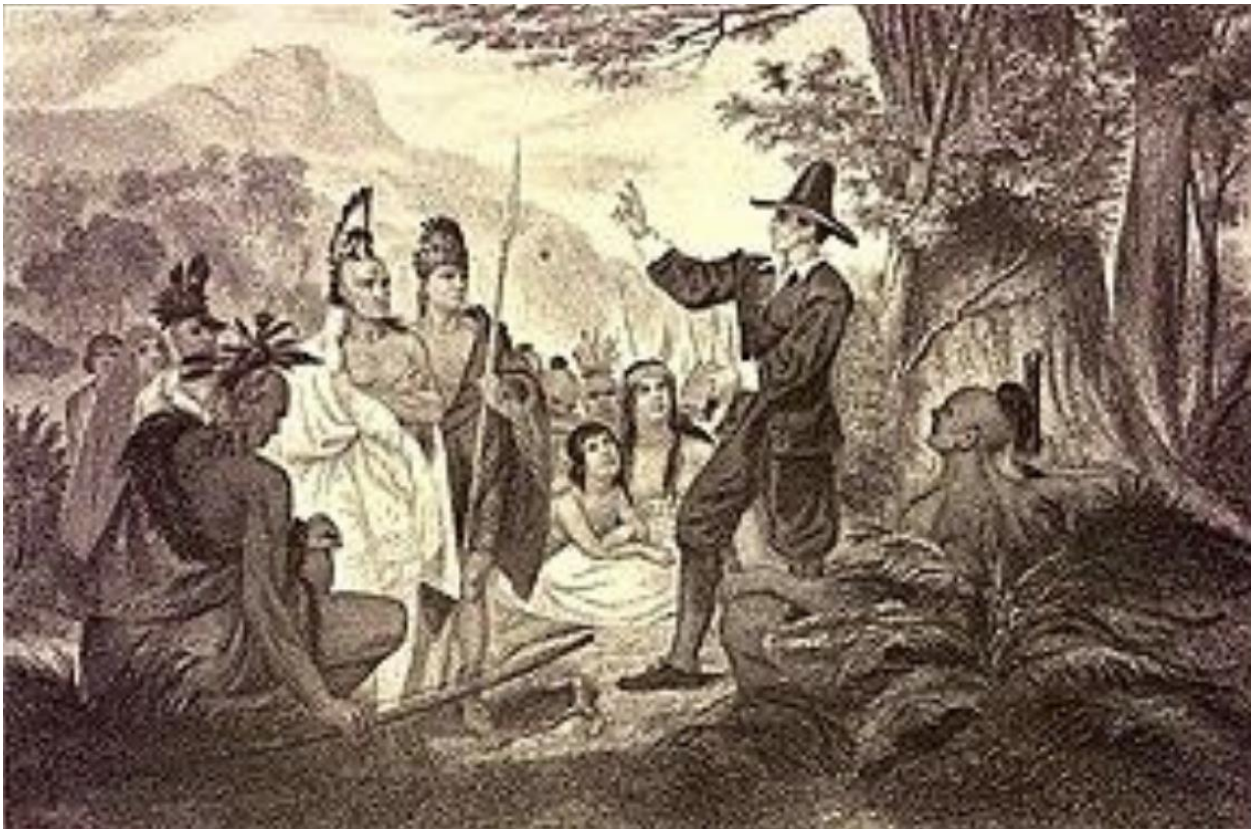

Figure 7 Reverend John Eliot preaches to the Indians. Illustration in Missionary Explorers Among the American Indians, M.G. Humphreys, 1913.

Figure 8 19th Century engraving of an incident in the Pequot War (1630-1632), caused by the expansion of Puritan colonies into Native territory. The war permanently changed the demographics of New England, with thousands of Native Americans killed, fleeing the region or sold into slavery.

What has given this complex its enduring emotional power is the archetype of rebirth, specifically the rebirth of the hero, at its core. Rebirth is depicted in countless myths and religions as a transformative process requiring the symbolic death of the old personality so that a new, enlarged or immortal personality can be reborn. Jung (1959) views this drive as an urge toward individuation. In the myth of the Frontier, the transformative process was concretized and projected. Rather than a symbolic death and renewal of one's personality, the desired "rebirth" was accomplished through heroic acts of violence

resulting in the literal death of the 'other' -- the carrier of unconscious shadow projections -- so that the colonizer/hero could regenerate a purified and more vigorous manhood.

Figure 9 "Daniel Boone Protects His Family". 19th century engraving. Artist unknown.

The prominence of regeneration images in American culture illustrates the importance of the rebirth motif in our collective psyche. Variously described as re- invention, renewal, transformation, becoming "born again," and even "a television makeover" of behavior or appearance, Americans keep seeking rebirth with the aim of becoming greater. Jung observed this, both while traveling in America and in the unconscious of his American patients. He wrote, ""America is perhaps the only country where "greatness" is unrestricted, because it expresses the most fundamental hopes, desires,

ambitions and convictions of the nation." It is no wonder that the promise of making America great again has touched a deep cultural nerve.

As the original colonies became increasingly "civilized," the idealized image of the "New World" transferred to "the Frontier." By the late 18th century, America's first culture hero emerged in the hunter Daniel Boone, whose legends engaged the popular imagination well into the twentieth century.

Boone was "the lover of the spirit of the wilderness, whose acts of love …are acts of violence" (Slotkin, 1973, p.22) against the natural world and those who inhabit it. According to Slotkin, in the Boone legends, we find two central themes that occupied much of the American literature that followed: the American dream of perpetual self-improvement through individual accomplishment; and the individual man's task of initiation and rebirth through acts of combat.

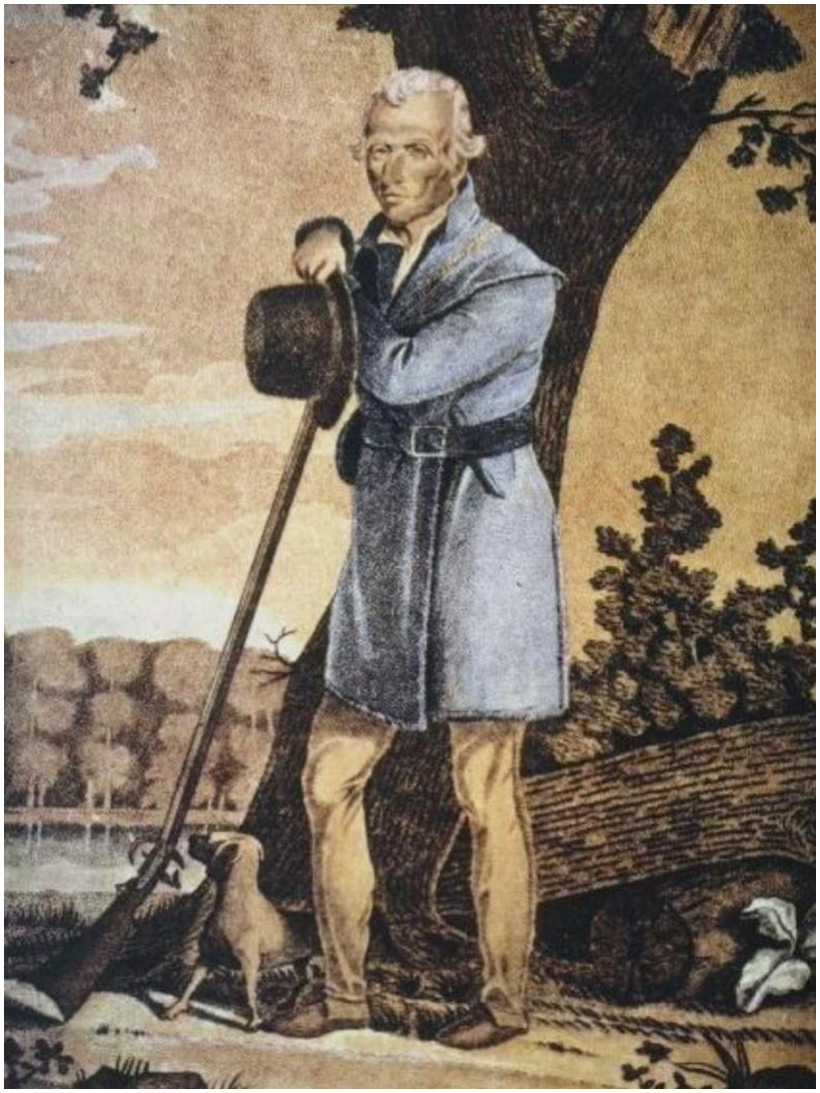

Figure 10 Daniel Boone, Color Engraving 1820, James Otto Lewis.

Figure 11 Woodcarving circa 1850 titled "Indians Emigrating" from an American school geography book. Artist unknown. Depicts as peaceful and voluntary the forced migration of the Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw and Seminole tribes (the Trail of Tears) from their ancestral homes in the Southeast to west of Mississippi. Of the 17,000 Indians forced to migrate in 1838 alone, an estimated 6,000 died during the march.

Figure 11 "American Progress", John Gast, 1872. This oil painting personifies Manifest Destiny as a goddess guiding colonists westward. Manifest destiny was the widely held idea that the United States was ordained by God to expand across the North American continent. This belief was used as justification for the removal of Native Americans and the acquisition of Mexican territory.

In 1890, the geographical American frontier was famously declared "closed." "The Frontier" lost any remaining tether to land and became an entirely symbolic place. While the road to the White House in the nineteenth century often began with a military adventure along the Rio Grande, in the twentieth century some of the most charismatic presidents simply appropriated potent images of frontier, harnessing political support to extend American military power far beyond North America. (It is worth noting that

Washington, Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt, consistently ranked as “the top three” American presidents by historians, did not utilize the Frontier myth to win election).

Theodore Roosevelt, a Harvard-educated son of New York high society, traded on a brief foray into cattle ranching to dub himself, the “Rough Rider,” and “The Cowboy President.” Roosevelt explicitly advocated and conducted foreign wars as the necessary condition for renewing the virility of American men, since the western frontier had closed.

Figure 12 Theodore Roosevelt, as a New York Assemblyman, 1882

Figure 13 Roosevelt as a cowboy in South Dakota, 1885

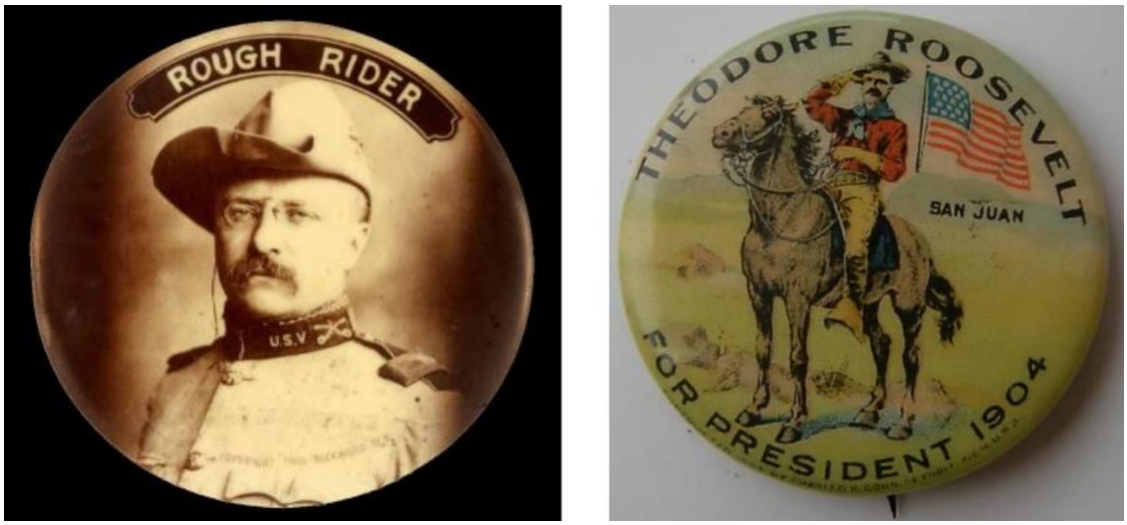

Figure 13 Presidential Campaign buttons, 1904

Figure 14 Theodore Roosevelt (center) surrounded by his all-volunteer brigade, the Rough Riders, in Cuba, 1898, during the Spanish American War. Roosevelt advocated for the war and resigned as Secretary of the Navy to fight. The reputation he gained in this war for control of Cuba and the Philippines led to his selection as McKinley's Vice President in 1904.

In mid-century, John Kennedy, another Harvard- educated son of the east coast, ran for President under the slogan, “The New Frontier,” a motto that promised to renew the American spirit through the battle with communism, ultimately justifying military incursion into Vietnam. American military slang of the era referred to Vietnam as “Indian country,” while search and destroy missions were nicknamed “Cowboys and Indians.”

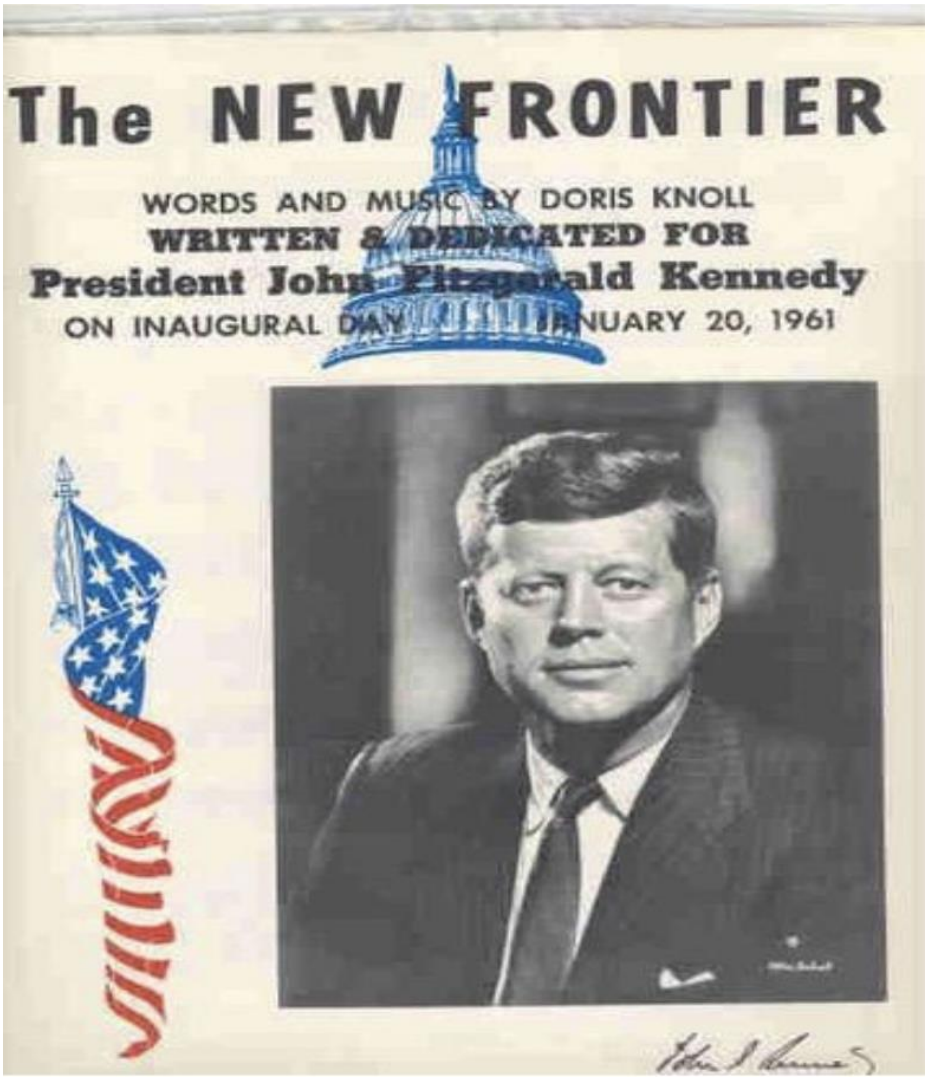

Figure 15 Concert Program, 1961

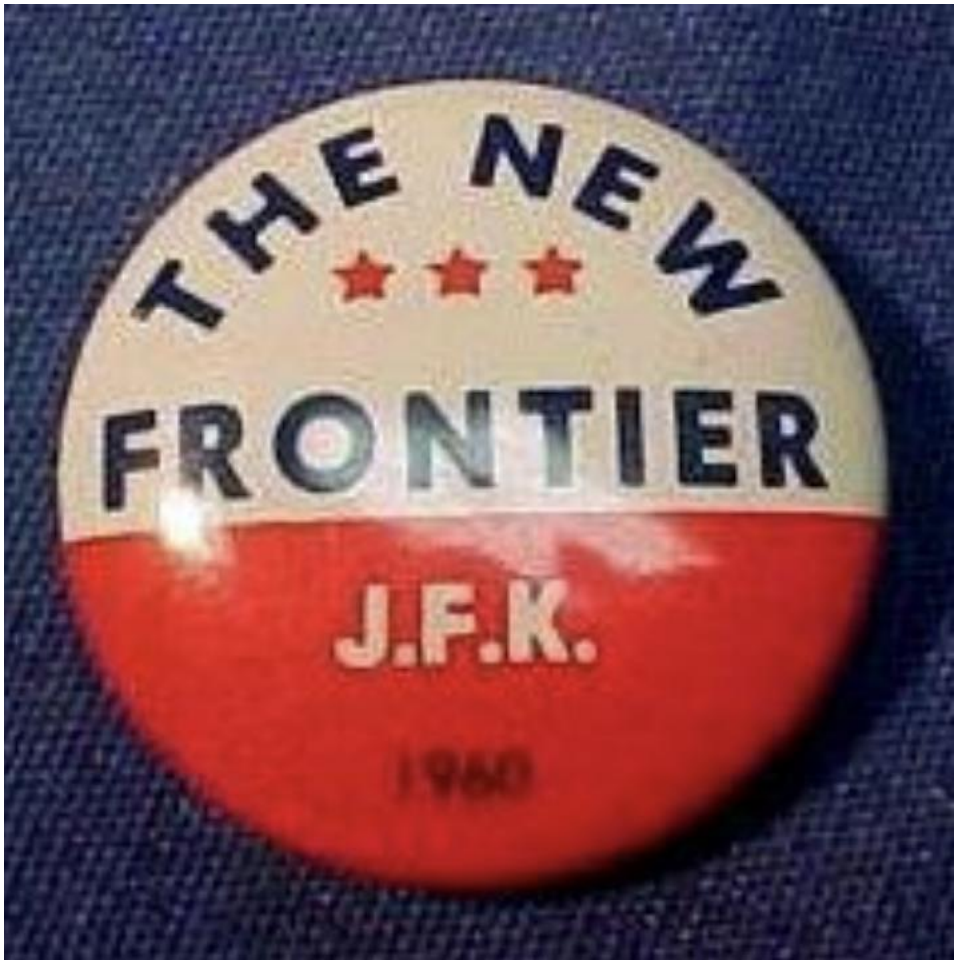

Figure 16 Campaign Button, 1960

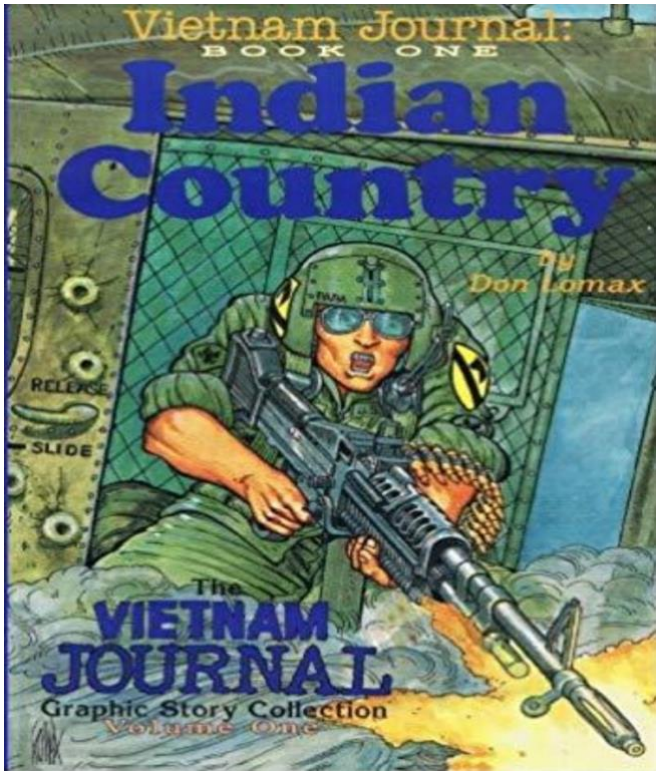

Figure 17 Book cover, Don Lomax,1987

In the 1980's, Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan invoked the myth of the Frontier through images that linked him closely with the tough film cowboys, John Wayne and Clint Eastwood. But while Roosevelt had once actually worked as a cowboy, Reagan's claim to the frontier myth rested entirely on his acting roles in western movies. He

achieved landslide election victories by tapping into the longing for rebirth with the iconic campaign slogans, "Let's Make American Great Again," and "Morning in America." In the name of "Standing Tall," Reagan gained wide support for covert incursions into the Middle East and Latin America, justified through imagery from the Frontier myth.

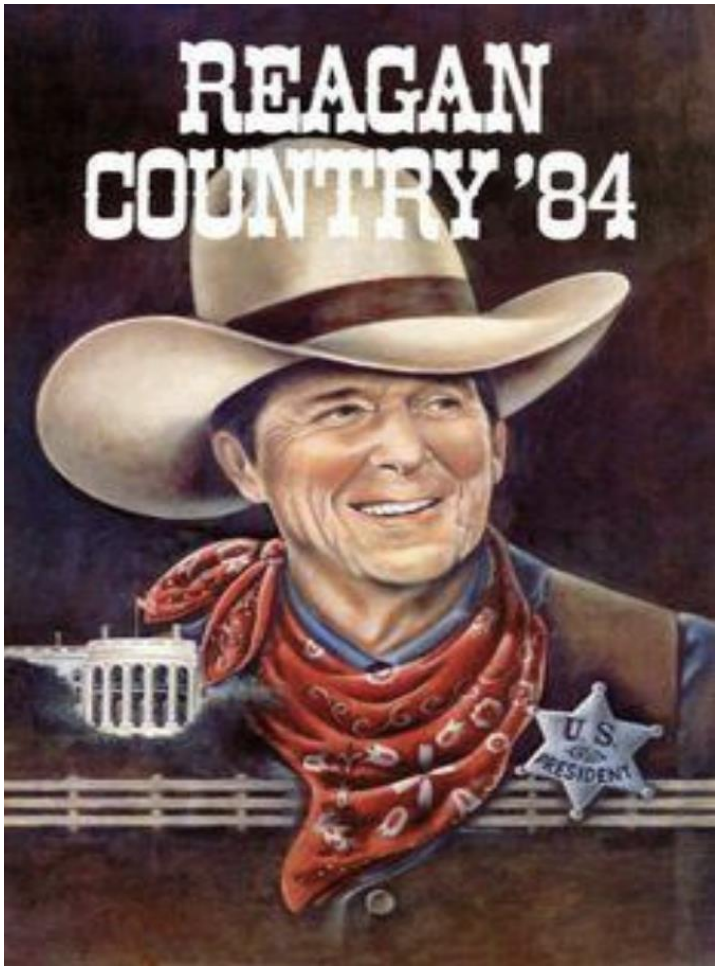

Figure 18 Presidential Campaign Poster, 1984

Figure 19 John Wayne

Figure 20 Campaign Buttons, 1980

Donald Trump has appropriated and exploited the same potent images. Trump's persona draws upon the traditional American frontier figures of the tough sheriff, the rugged individualist and the self-made man. Like Reagan, his identification with the Frontier myth is based on fiction. A child of inherited wealth, who avoided military service, he played a self-made tycoon on television. Even his slogan, "Make American Great Again," is stolen from Reagan. His demands to open new frontiers by annexing Greenland, Panama and Canada explicitly extend the nineteenth century's "Manifest Destiny" ideology to all of North America, while his calls for mass deportations echo the proponents of the Indian Removal Act (1830) and the anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic 'Know Nothing' Party (1850's). At the center of this cultural complex, little has changed from the longing for rebirth through violence that drove the Puritans to decimate the indigenous people whose land they coveted.

Figure 21 NFTs sold by Donald Trump, 2023

Figure 22 Trump hangs a portrait of Andrew Jackson, architect of the Trail of Tears, in the Oval Office, 2017.

Among the psychological expressions of this cultural complex, several characteristics stand out:

Traditional masculinity: Beginning with Daniel Boone, the culture heroes who personified the myth of the frontier are characterized by patriarchy, stoicism, competitiveness and aggression.

Individualism: The Frontier myth promises perpetual self-aggrandizement through individual accomplishment.

Disposition toward violence: From the early Indian hunters to the young mass shooters of today, violence has been elevated as an initiatory path to redemption and virility.

Religious fervor: Beginning with the first European settlers, America has been viewed as a land ordained by God for the elect. Religion has been used throughout American history to justify scapegoating.

Anti-Intellectualism: The historian Richard Hofstadter (1962) famously described a "complex of related propositions," active throughout American history, bound together by "resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind (and) of those considered to represent it."

Projective Politics: Hofstadter also described what he termed "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" (1964), describing "movements of suspicious discontent" which he traced throughout American history and located in

conspiracy-minded movements of his day, including McCarthyism, right wing libertarianism and the John Birch Society.

Scapegoating: Psychologically, the scapegoat is the group's container for the shadow. A boundary is erected to separate the scapegoat from the group: the wilderness, the Indian reservation, the ghetto, the border wall. The group thereby experiences safety and cohesion.

Together these beliefs and attitudes, long associated with images of the Frontier, and organized around the archetypal core of the hero's rebirth through violence, have had profound structuring power in America's cultural identity. They can be regarded as the shadow of the Jeffersonian ideal of an enlightened republic, with equality for all, under the rule of law. While the MAGA movement has thrust these shadow elements into public view, they have been here all along, generally erupting in times of cultural uncertainty.

A different archetypal image of rebirth is the emergence, during the darkest times, of hope and renewal from an undervalued place. This also has been true all along. While we cannot know where the current activation of America's darkest story will take us, we can keep faith with a psychological fact: anything that becomes too one- sided constellates its opposite.

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