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## Cultural Commentary: An American Myth – Take

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# AN AMERICAN MYTH - TAKE

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As we enter another presidential campaign season we should, in our own defense, sharpen our skills at recognizing the candidates' manipulation of our national symbols. I'm not talking about the baby-kissing, flag-waving, ethnic-food-consuming sort of symbols. Those are merely photo-opportunity level messages designed to reassure us that a candidate has roughly the same sorts of innards (cranial and otherwise) as we do. Rather, I am concerned about those more deeply held values that identify us as a people, values like patriotism, progress, and individualism. The politician who succeeds in manipulating the symbols for such values in a way that pleases the electorate will, as usual, have the inside track to the presidency.

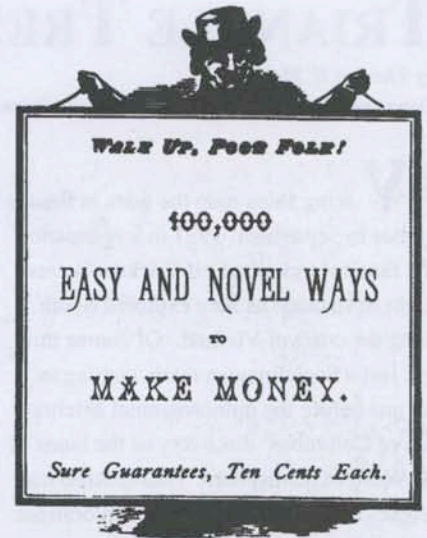
As a case study, let's look at individualism, an American value which sociologists agree was fundamental in the founding of our country, and is still powerful in our identity. This is most clearly seen in the presidency of Ronald Reagan, whose dominant ideological belief was that the unencumbered individual is the engine of our productivity and the genius of our liberties. No president in modern times has manipulated the symbols of this value better than Reagan.

What, then, can the presidential candidates in 1992 do to identify themselves with American individualism? What symbols are there to manipulate? One clear candidate is good old (died in 1899) Horatio Alger. His name is still invoked to characterize people who rise from "rags to riches" by reason of their hard work, moral purity, wit, and willingness to take risks. Curious about the survival of this dated symbol of American virtues, I went looking for some of the facts of Alger's life and works. I found that the phrase "Horatio Alger story" as most people understand it, has little to do with Alger

and a great deal to do with American myth-making

Reference works estimate the number of books Alger wrote at something over 120. Of these, about 100 were stories about the adventures of poor boys, including titles like *Forging Ahead*, *Making His Mark*, *Cast Upon the Breakers*, and *Ragged Dick*; or, *Street Life in New York with the Bootblacks*. Our politicians invoke these stories in their "rags to riches" sense, talking about how the heroes get rich because of their hard work, willingness to take chances, and their high moral character. In fact, Alger's books do not teach this simple lesson. In story after story a poor boy does work hard, takes chances and follows his Puritan moral compass. But it is not these qualities, but dumb luck, that leads to wealth. For example, in *Cast Upon the Breakers* young Rodney Ropes, a lowly but honest and aspiring clerk, has been wrongly accused of embezzling from the company of Otis Goodnow. During his effort to clear his name by discovering the true criminals, Ropes is kidnapped and held for ransom in a cave, in which he discovers gold. In countless other Alger books, the young street boy is eventually discovered to be the long lost child of phenomenally wealthy people, or otherwise stumbles into wealth during an adventure. We modern Americans have culturally edited the stories to make them conform to what we wish them to say, and have ignored the inconvenient details which Alger included to express his personal and theological beliefs.

And what about Alger himself? It is common to hear that a person's life is like a "Horatio Alger story," as if Alger himself lived the "rags to riches" life. In fact, Alger was born in rather comfortable circumstances, the son of a pompous and overbearing father who controlled the boy's destiny. Alger was no adventurer, nor was he any kind of capitalist. His stories made a good



deal of money (though the great bulk were sold after his death) but Alger squandered the money he made and died penniless. And what of Alger's moral character? He attended Harvard Divinity School and was for fifteen months minister of the Brewster (Mass.) Unitarian Church. The *Dictionary of American Biography* (1964) says he resigned the position to "devote himself to literature," but the *Oxford Companion to American Literature* (1983) reports that he was "perhaps ousted for questionable relations with his choirboys." In his "tell all" biography of Alger in 1974, Edwin Hoyt cites records of the Brewster Unitarian Church which report that Alger did not deny the charges leveled against him by a committee of church elders, but merely admitted to "imprudence," and left town on the next train.

Sometimes we want too much for the symbols of our way of life to be as we imagine them. We know that if we examine our myths closely we will find them to be as flawed and complex as our own lives. But if in the process of examination some of the lovely haze of nostalgia gets rubbed off our dreams, in the long run our worthwhile symbols will survive (baseball comes to mind) and we will be alerted to the kinds of misrepresentation which are all too common in political campaigns. ♣