

The Creation of Popular Heroes

Author(s): Orrin E. Klapp

Source: *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Sep., 1948), pp. 135-141

Published by: [University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2771362>

Accessed: 24-10-2015 04:07 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Journal of Sociology*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE CREATION OF POPULAR HEROES

ORRIN E. KLAPP

ABSTRACT

The popular hero is a social type having certain definable roles. The problem of making a hero is that of imputing to a person these roles and of maintaining and building a collective interpretation which has the character of a legend. The destroying of a hero is the casting of him in antiheroic roles. Social types, especially fundamental symbols such as the hero, the villain, and the fool, provide a key to collective psychology because the mass recognizes and readily responds to these symbols.

An age of mass hero worship is an age of instability. The contemporary heroes who are emerging in politics, sports, entertainment, religion, and in every other field in which the public is interested are a focus of social reorientation in a time of rapid change. Max Weber provides a fruitful concept of charismatic leadership which helps to indicate some of the implications of sectarian and revolutionary movements oriented by popular leaders and heroes.

Heroes arise in four general ways: by spontaneous popular recognition and homage; by formal selection, as in the case of canonization and military decoration; by the gradual growth of popular legends; and also as the poetical creations of dramatists, story-tellers, and writers. However heroes emerge, they tend to be recognized by a certain characteristic social behavior of hero worship: they are honored and given special status; they are commemorated by dramas, legends, memorials, relics, and the like; and they frequently receive regular veneration or celebration by organized cults. A hero is defined as a person, real or imaginary, who evokes the appropriate attitudes and behavior.

The hero in social life is thus essentially more than a person; he is an ideal image, a legend, a symbol. The study of growing hero legends shows us that the fame of a hero is a collective product, being largely a number of popular imputations and interpretations. Once formed, as has been often said, the legend of a hero "lives a life of its own." The creation of a hero from a historical person is therefore visualized as the attachment of certain roles and traits to him through drama, news, publicity, rumor, and other

media, so as to show him in a collective interpretation. By far the majority of popular heroes emerge without a deliberate effort having been made to create them; the development of a hero is largely an involuntary collective process.

A hypothetical problem in public relations is (a) how to transform a mediocre personality into a personage of heroic stature and great public appeal or (b) how to destroy a popular hero by casting him in, or attaching to him, various roles which are especially antiheroic. One might be concerned with such a problem, for instance, in the preparation of a political candidate or in propaganda against the hero of an antagonistic social movement or nation.

This includes specific problems such as the relative importance of the personality features of heroes; precisely what roles to attach to build up or to destroy heroic status; and by what means to attach these roles, e.g., how best to employ publicity and communications media.

A study of popular heroes and hero types in myth and legend¹ provides a basis for the evaluation of certain factors in their creation, namely, (1) the situations in which heroes emerge—principally interest, crisis, and drama; (2) heroic and antiheroic roles; (3) "color"; (4) personal traits; (5) stories and rumors; (6) publicity; and (7) organization of the popular reaction to the hero.

HERO-MAKING SITUATIONS

Heroes arise in areas of life where there is a focus of public interest. These need not be important historical situations but are per-

¹ Orrin E. Klapp, "The Hero as a Social Type" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1948).

haps better described as events having drama and human interest, such as sports and theatrical performances, as well as battles and political crises. They are situations of suspense or unmet need, such as conflict, competition, effort, or struggle. When an issue is felt to be important and its outcome is, at the same time, in doubt, a favorable situation is created. Practically speaking, a politician who is sensitive to the issues which are temporarily arousing people or who can create crises is in a position to make himself a hero.

HEROIC ROLES

The study of mythical and popular heroes shows the following possible roles: (1) the conquering hero, (2) the Cinderella, (3) the clever hero, (4) the delivering and avenging hero, (5) the benefactor, and (6) the martyr.

The conquering hero as a type is created by roles which give the actuality or the illusion of superhuman power.² The performance of miraculous feats is an outstanding characteristic of folk heroes, such as Beowulf, Siegfried, and Paul Bunyan. In contests the conquering hero is invincible; in feats he is inimitable. Such are Jack Dempsey and Babe Ruth. Also important are tests which show superhuman endurance, skill, bravery, or virtue. Such, for instance, are the stunts which made the late Houdini such a hero as an "escape artist." In practical application, any story, impression, photograph, rumor, or role which can be engineered to emphasize the extraordinary power of the candidate, or his supremacy in any field of endeavor, is likely to help make him a popular hero. Conversely, any sign of weakness will diminish his stature.

If the candidate is a person of youthful or unpromising appearance, the Cinderella or "dark-horse" role may make him a hero. In this role, a hero who apparently hasn't a chance, who perhaps has been ridiculed, rises to success over more favored oppo-

nents. Among American popular heroes the cases of Lindbergh and of "Wally" Simpson will be familiar. Lindbergh, arriving to compete in a trans-Atlantic air race at the last moment as an "unknown," created by his unexpected success an unparalleled public impression. A variant of the Cinderella theme is that of the "poor boy who makes good." This is usefully attached to political candidates by publicity writers. Most major American heroes were "poor boys" or "orphans." In another practical context let us take the case of a "rookie" pitcher who has real, but hidden, promise. If it were desired by a professional baseball club to build him up into a hero, it might be useful to publicize him first as a Cinderella-like figure, as an orphan like Babe Ruth, or as a boy who has suffered ridicule from other players; then let him shine forth with a brilliant record of victories. Much popular interest might be attracted to this unknown and the basis laid for a popular hero.³

A role which emphasizes cleverness rather than strength has helped make many American popular heroes, including Abraham Lincoln, Davy Crockett, Will Rogers, and Huey Long. This is found in folklore in the role of Reynard the Fox. A person who bests his rivals by wit, unexpected tricks, or hoaxes is likely to become a great favorite with the people. The clever hero requires the opposition of an opponent of much superior size, power, or pretense. The Eulenspiegel character has the charm of humor as a saving grace which helps to offset any moral defects he may have, for it is well known that the clever hero is frequently a "rogue." But his defeated opponents are fools. In public life, if any person continually and impudently flouts forces which are superior, he may acquire the status of a popular hero even though a lawbreaker.⁴ For the appeal of the

³ A third variant of the Cinderella role is that of the "giant-killer," a small person who unexpectedly defeats a formidable opponent, as in the tale of David and Goliath.

⁴ For instance, the bandit leaders Pancho Villa and Jesse James. The appeal of the legendary Robin Hood consisted partly in his continual escapes from the Sheriff of Nottingham.

² We may note this in the creation of movie heroes who knock out "setups" with the help of sound effects emphasizing the force of their punches.

clever hero is the perennial triumph of "brains over brawn," *la sagesse des petits*. A practical way in which this role might be exploited would be to pit a candidate who has some cleverness against dull opponents whom he can publicly foil with a joke. Much of Lincoln's effectiveness as a stump speaker can be attributed to his resourcefulness vis-à-vis pompous and pretentious opponents.

The delivering hero is one who comes in time of need to save people in danger or distress. The effectiveness of the role depends upon a dramatic climax, in which the plight of the victim becomes as serious as possible before the hero enters. That these situations operate to make heroes in real life is evidenced by the medals given every year for lifesaving. The popularity of military leaders is often based upon this role. Almost any social problem or crisis in politics, sports, or everyday life provides an opportunity for a delivering hero. To make a social problem seem as serious as possible before a political leader takes action to correct it would be one practical way of increasing the popularity of a statesman.

Benefactions also do much to improve the popularity of a public figure. Many American heroes have been kindhearted men who aided the poor and unfortunate. The legends of Franklin, Washington, and Lincoln are full of such stories.⁵ Some of Babe Ruth's popularity is due to tales of his visits to sick boys to encourage them and to present them with bats. John D. Rockefeller's reputation was improved by a public relations counsel's advice to give dimes to little boys. Visits to hospitals have become a standard public relations routine for celebrities. It may be noted that some of Al Capone's popularity as a hero centered around his role as a public "benefactor" and the many stories of his "Santa Claus" generosity.

A final role which is of great power in creating heroes is that of the martyr. A theme of self-sacrifice woven into the story of any public figure gives him additional prestige.

⁵ Native Louisianians still point to the bridges "that Huey built."

The strength of martyr cults,⁶ as well as the potency of figures such as Lincoln and Gandhi as symbols, rests upon their having suffered death for a cause.⁷ Hitler astutely exploited this in the case of Horst Wessel. At times the need of a movement for a martyr may be so great that very unlikely figures become martyr symbols.⁸ We may say that any crisis or conflict in which an important cause is involved provides an opportunity for some person to achieve the status of martyr.

"COLOR"

The quality of "color" seems to be in actions or traits which excite popular interest and imagination, giving rise to stories which recount or interpret these features. The term "color" may be applied to public figures who tend to stand out from rivals by virtue of things they do or of striking personal traits.⁹ Color has apparently three main functions: (a) to excite attention, interest, imagination, and interpretation; (b) to set a person apart, rendering him unique or peculiar; and (c) to make him unforgettable. There are two ways in which it is exploited by public figures: through actions or roles and through personal traits. In the former case impressive style or virtuosity—sometimes called "grandstanding" or "showmanship"—is of great importance in making performers popular. Musicians frequently play difficult passages not because of their

⁶ See D. W. Riddle, *The Martyrs: A Study in Social Control* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931).

⁷ Note, e.g., the myths of Roland, Siegfried, Achilles, Samson, Cuchulain, Robin Hood, Jesse James.

⁸ L. H. Jenks, "The John Brown Myth," *American Mercury*, I (1924), 267-73; note also the Sacco and Vanzetti case.

⁹ "Color" in athletics usually means a peculiar style or idiosyncrasy which serves to attract and excite interest in a player. Both Babe Ruth and Jack Dempsey had "natural color." Another meaning of the term "color" is supplied from the field of literature: being a quality of vivacity or picturesqueness which makes localities or characters stand out as unique places or personalities.

musical merit but because they will show off talents. Dancers and acrobats, similarly, frequently exaggerate the difficulty of certain acts in order to draw applause from the crowd. The other type of color, that of personal traits, is found in distinctive features, mannerisms, and dress; for instance, in Hitler's mustache or General Patton's pearl-handled pistols. We conclude that color in the form of eccentricities, affectations, and the like help in creating heroes, regardless of their other significance, because they excite interest, give people something to talk about, and make a distinct impression on the memory. We must note, however, that there are many heroes who lack personal color.¹⁰ Color by itself is not sufficient to make a hero unless a heroic role is played and the right combination of other factors achieved.

PERSONAL TRAITS OF HEROES

What part do personal traits play in the making of heroes? In general, personal traits are relatively unimportant, for the emergence of a hero is a matter of popular selection. If a personal trait cannot be perceived, it is of little value in the creation of the public impression which is the essence of the hero. The public, indeed, is usually ignorant of its heroes.¹¹ There are several reasons for this: First, at the time of emergence of a hero the public usually has little opportunity for making direct observations; second, actions have a permanent advantage over traits in commanding interest and attention; third, the public usually infers the traits of a hero from the thing he has done. Therefore, we may say that roles rather than traits make heroes and that personal traits are subordinate to roles. The conclu-

sion that personal traits are relatively unimportant in creating heroes is consistent with a symbolic theory of the hero: even the best-known public figures are to a large extent legend.¹² Distance builds the "great man." Regardless of what inherent qualities a candidate may have, if he plays a suitable public role he can become a hero. Carlyle was wrong when he said hero worship is the "reverence and obedience done to men really great and wise."

Several ways, however, may be noted in which actual personal qualities help to create the role of the hero. First, the traits which the public is able to perceive should be consistent with the role. For instance, when an effort was made to beautify Jack Dempsey for the movies, there was a popular outcry among his fans that they preferred him to remain ugly and look his part as a fighter. Second, a feature, such as physique, has a value for suggesting to the public the kind of role the person will play. For instance, broad shoulders predispose a man to the part of the conquering hero. It was said that General Pershing's "strong jaw" lent him an appearance of power. Practically speaking, it is easier to cast a small, witty person as a clever hero, a young person as a Cinderella, or a person with a kind countenance as a martyr.¹³ Third, where the performance of a role is dependent upon the actual possession of a personal trait, we may say that inherent qualities help to make the hero. For instance, much of Babe Ruth's batting power was attributed to an actual superiority of physique, eyesight, and muscular co-ordination, as established by psy-

¹² See R. P. Basler, *The Lincoln Legend* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1935); Cameron Rogers, *The Legend of Calvin Coolidge* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1928).

¹³ The exceptions to this are almost as numerous as the rule: Napoleon was a little man who played the conquering hero. Good looks or even a "baby face" can hardly be considered an insuperable obstacle to creating the role of a "killer." While attractive features may be of value in inclining people to like a candidate, some of the least prepossessing persons have become popular heroes. Will Rogers used to remark that he had "the ugliest face in the films." Note also Al Capone.

¹⁰ It has frequently been observed, for instance, that General Pershing, the most popular hero of World War I, was almost totally devoid of personal color. Similarly, St. Thérèse of Lisieux was a nun lacking in personal traits or actions which would make her conspicuous.

¹¹ It cannot perceive their actual traits. All it knows about them is their public roles. The demand for biographies, information, anecdotes, etc., is a testimony of the public's ignorance of its heroes.

chological tests. On the other hand, the opportunities for illusion and legend-building are so tremendous that there is no constellation of personal traits which could keep a person from becoming a hero if a heroic role were played, and there are no personal traits per se which can make a hero unless a heroic role is played or attributed to the person in the public mind.

STORIES AND RUMORS

The remark of an actress that "it is better to have someone talk about you, even if they say ill things, than not to talk about you at all" is valid in the case of popular heroes. The conceptions of heroic and antiheroic roles provide a framework within which deliberately to initiate legends. In addition to heroic roles, anecdotes regarding personal idiosyncrasies and preferences will do much to "humanize" a hero, particularly if he is little known personally.¹⁴ Will Rogers' "wisecracks," which depicted him as a clever hero and homespun wit, were repeated throughout the nation. Finally, deliberate fabrication of stories, for example, dime novels, proved to be effective in the case of Buffalo Bill.¹⁵

PUBLICITY

Any means of placing a figure before the public eye will help to make him a hero. However, the importance of mere publicity has been greatly exaggerated.¹⁶ Heroes emerge typically without deliberate publicity,¹⁷ and many persons in the limelight

fail to become heroes. A good example of the failure to make heroes through publicity is provided by inept publicity stunts, such as aerial weddings, flagpole sitting, and dives off the Brooklyn Bridge, which attract attention but fail to arouse hero worship. In the age of mass communications, however, heroes can be more arbitrarily manufactured and more quickly and widely diffused, once a formula for making heroes is found.

ORGANIZING THE POPULAR REACTION TO THE HERO

Finally, some contribution can be made to the creation of a popular hero by organizing the popular reaction to him. Souvenir-collecting, fan-letter writing, and popular homage can be organized in various ways. Babe Ruth clubs were started among American boys by a candy company. Likewise the autographing of balls and bats by Babe Ruth became a standard public relations technique. Similarly Lindbergh clubs, Rudolph Valentino associations, and Sinatra clubs have been formed. In the latter case, juvenile "swooners" have been encouraged and organized in their behavior by deliberately planted clagues. Huey Long's organization was nation-wide and showed signs of becoming a major political party. It is not desired, however, to overemphasize the degree to which popular reaction to a hero can be deliberately stimulated. The success of these efforts depends largely upon a good deal of prior enthusiasm.

ANTIHEROIC ROLES

A difficult problem is presented in the effort to destroy a hero. In general, it may be said that the longer a hero has been in existence, the more developed his legend, the harder it is to destroy him. Certainly it is hard to shake the popular faith in a hero

¹⁴ For instance, the fact that General Pershing stopped to talk to a little boy was avidly seized upon by the public. Humanizing stories, incidentally, will do much to destroy the character of a villain.

¹⁵ R. J. Walsh and M. S. Salsbury, *The Making of Buffalo Bill* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1928).

¹⁶ "Today, more than ever before, belief in 'the hero' is a synthetic product. Whoever controls the microphones and printing presses can make or unmake belief overnight. . . . Particularly today, any 'front' man can be built up into a 'hero' " (Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History* [New York: John Day Co., 1943], pp. 10, 153).

¹⁷ The case of Sergeant York provides an instance. The rumor of his exploit spread through the

Army and finally forced cognizance from headquarters, at which time reporters and photographers picked up the story and disseminated it to the nation. Deliberate agitation, however, served crucially to bring heroes to the attention of the public in the case of Sacco and Vanzetti.

once established.¹⁸ People are loyal to their heroes and usually defend them. Mere truth does not suffice to undermine this loyalty, as the debunkers of Lincoln have found out. There are certain crises in the formation of hero legends which can be exploited to destroy a hero, and there are certain roles or traits which are antiheroic. These are (1) weakness, (2) treachery, (3) persecution, and (4) the character of the clown or fool.

Where the hero is of the "conquering" type, a demonstrated weakness, such as cowardice or defeat in a contest, may serve to destroy the myth of his invincibility. This is evidenced in the case of Al Capone, who after his conviction for income-tax evasion lost much of his glamour. Until then it was popularly thought that he could "fix" any judge and evade any law.

The hero may also "step down" to another champion. Yet, a "fair and honorable" defeat does not serve to tarnish the reputation of a hero, as is seen in the cases of the boxing heroes John L. Sullivan and Jack Dempsey. If, in his defeat, there has been the possibility of unfairness or treachery, this will be made the occasion for casting him as a martyr. Thus, at the time of Dempsey's defeat by Gene Tunney, a "long count" by a referee provided a basis for a claim of unfairness, and Dempsey's popularity rose, while Tunney acquired the temporary character of a villain. Similarly, if the hero is overcome by overwhelming forces, as Davy Crockett or Hitler, it is likely that he will be cast as a martyr. Finally, if the hero is assassinated, as in the case of Huey Long, it may be that he will acquire elevated status. Thus, the defeat of a hero, unless clearly a result of his own cowardice or weakness, may serve to strengthen rather than to weaken his image.

Any public occasion in which a person is

¹⁸ This is evidenced in the inability of people to believe that the hero has died, as demonstrated by the legends of "sleeping heroes" (e.g., Arthur, Frederick Barbarossa) who will return in time of need. See H. R. Trevor-Roper, "The Last Days of Hitler," *Life*, March 17, 1947; G. E. Simpson and J. B. Cineas, "Folk Tales of Haitian Heroes," *Journal of American Folklore*, LIV (1941), 183-84.

forced to make a stand against a popular person or cause may cast him in an anti-heroic role. Thus, in 1940, Lindbergh, although he had the status of a hero, took a position of apparent support to Germany and endangered his popularity. In the eyes of many he was almost a traitor. We may say that the "Judas" role¹⁹ is particularly applicable to persons who contend against popular causes or defeat unfairly established popular heroes. Thus, John Wilkes Booth, far from acquiring the status of a champion of the South (which he was in his own eyes) by the assassination of Lincoln, became a detested villain.

Whenever a public figure comes in conflict with a person of inferior power who has some degree of public sympathy, he runs the danger of being defined as a persecutor.²⁰ The rival, if ruthlessly dealt with or persecuted, may become a victim, or even a martyr if identified with a popular cause. Thus, the famous slapping incident in the career of General George S. Patton during the recent war did much to dim the glory of what otherwise might have been a spectacular popular hero. The role of the "bully" is also found in an incident in the early career of Jack Dempsey, which had much to do with a temporary unpopularity. In his fight with Georges Carpentier, a French war hero, in 1921, Dempsey found himself characterized as a "slacker" who had failed to register for the draft. His brutal victory over Carpentier was pictured in the press as a martyrdom for a valiant but outmatched fighter. Dempsey's victory was greeted with hardly a cheer from the public at the ringside. He found himself more unpopular after the knockout than before, bearing the double stigma of a "coward" and "draft-dodger" and of the bully who persecutes righteousness.

Clearly it is dangerous for a potential

¹⁹ The traitor role is found throughout folklore in villains who betray heroes: Hagen, Ganelon, Mordred, Robert Ford, Delilah.

²⁰ In folklore this role is embodied in Herod, Pontius Pilate, Goliath, who persecute heroes.

hero to gain ruthless victories over weaker figures, especially if his own status is insecure. The only time that a hero can persecute ruthlessly is when his opponent has been defined indisputably as a traitor, as in the case of J. Edgar Hoover's pursuit of "public enemies" and Hitler's persecution of the Jews.

One of the most effective roles for depreciating a public figure is that of the "clown" or "fool." Roles portraying ineptness or stupidity,²¹ particularly ludicrous defeats at the hands of apparently lesser rivals, will give a personage this character. A victory of a clever hero usually "makes a fool of" somebody. An example is an episode in the early career of General Pershing. Prior to the World War, Pershing was delegated to head a punitive expedition into Mexico, in pursuit of the bandit, Pancho Villa. Much publicity was given to the campaign in the press, and week after week there came reports of how Pancho Villa, the clever hero of Mexico, had outwitted and "escaped" time and again from the formidable American force which had been sent to "get him dead or alive." The situation became ludicrous, and the Wilson administration as well as Pershing narrowly escaped embarrassment by the recalling of the expedition from

Mexico to attend to more urgent matters, namely, the war with Germany. Villa never was caught, and he remained the hero of Mexico. It happened that Pershing's next role as deliverer of the Allies overshadowed his previous near-fiasco, and he became a great American popular hero. Much of the strategy of political campaigns, of course, is concerned with making a fool of the rival candidate. And no one who has been thoroughly made a fool in the public eye has much chance to become a hero.

The study of popular heroes suggests that heroes, villains, and fools are among certain basic social symbols. The popular mind is structured with regard to the categories by which it defines persons and situations. When a person becomes defined as a hero, he is potentially a very attractive and powerful leader. These basic roles by which persons are defined constitute primitive images which, while they are not inherited archetypes as Jung suggested but probably are based on universal human experiences, provide a key to collective psychology. The masses react in terms of certain standard definitions which can be appreciated by everybody. In this way large numbers of people can be quickly mobilized into certain collective emotions, whether of hero worship or of generosity, humor, vengeance, or hate.

CARLETON COLLEGE

²¹ Chamberlain, after Munich, lingered between two antiheroic roles: the fool and the traitor.