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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

America's Guardian Myths

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AT length they came and beset our own house, and quickly it was the dolefulest day that ever mine eyes saw." Thus did a minister's wife, Mary Rowlandson, describe the Indian attack and immolation of her Massachusetts village, 35 miles west of Boston. "On the 10th of February 1675 came the Indians with great numbers upon Lancaster," she wrote. "Their first coming was about sun-rising. Hearing the noise of some guns, we looked out; several houses were burning, and the smoke ascending to heaven."

Rowlandson was one of the fortunate that morning: she and her three children were spared and taken captive. Her youngest, a 6-year-old daughter, died in her arms on the forced march north. After 11 harrowing weeks, Rowlandson was released and a few years later wrote "A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson," which would run through four printings in its first year and become America's original best seller, the model of the captivity narrative, the foremost indigenous genre of American literature.

Huddled inside the garrison, with "the smoke ascending to heaven," Mary Rowlandson and the other villagers faced a choice that echoes grimly through the commemorations of our own "dolefulest day": whether to stay inside and burn, or plunge into certain death. The parallels between the Lancaster ordeal and the catastrophe we faced on 9/11 are not incidental. Rowlandson's story holds a key to our own experience, shedding light on not only the trauma of the day itself but our response. On a deep cultural and psychological level, our reactions as a nation to 9/11 had as much to do with Mary Rowlandson as with Mohamed Atta.

In the weeks and months after 9/11, many commentators described the "dream-like" mindset that the disaster had induced. They attributed our fugue state to the "unimaginable" unreality of the event. Nothing like this had ever happened before. But essential to our understanding of what that attack means to our national psyche is a recognition that it did happen before, over and over. And its happening was instrumental to the formation of the American character. The nation that recently imagined itself so impervious to attack at home was gestated in a time

when such attacks were the prevailing reality of American life.

The assault on Lancaster came several months into King Philip's War (or Metacom's Rebellion, for those who prefer the actual name of the Wampanoag chief). That fearsome and formative confrontation between white settlers and the New England tribes remains, per capita, America's deadliest war. In one year, one of every 10 white men of military age in Massachusetts Bay was killed, and one of every 16 in the Northeastern colonies. Two-thirds of New England towns were attacked and more than half the settlements were left in ruins. Settlers were forced to retreat nearly to the coast, and the Colonial economy was devastated.

The bitterness unleashed on both sides would initiate a harrowing series of conflicts — King William's War, Queen Anne's War, King George's War, the French and Indian War — that dragged on into the second half of the 18th century. Caught in these coils, early American settlers dwelled in a state of perpetual insecurity — "an atmosphere of terror," as the frontier historian Richard Slotkin characterized it, in which colonists wandered as if in an "Indian-haunted dreamland." It was an insecurity that would continue to afflict settlers pressing westward through the early decades of the 19th century.

What is the relevance of all this to 9/11 and its aftermath? Surely, given the historical forgetfulness of Americans, not many people know Rowlandson's name or recall her era's conflicts. Nevertheless, that Colonial travail profoundly shaped our modern society and lives on in our world view, whether we are conscious of it or not. Our original "war on terrorism" bequeathed us a heritage that haunts our reaction to crises like the one that struck on that crisp, clear morning in the late summer of 2001.

Even our amnesia is evidence of this haunting, because the amnesia was not natural. It was intentionally induced by the creation of a myth, a fable of national invincibility on the American frontier. Beginning in the 18th century and culminating in the Victorian era, journalists, novelists, artists and sculptors concocted a fantasy that supplanted memories of vulnerability and terror on the Northeastern borderlands with tales of conquest and victory on the Great Plains.

By the mid-1700s, a new frontier literature emerged, starring battle-hardened and wilderness-savvy frontiersmen who could take on the Indians, the French and, eventually, the British. And captivity narratives were rewritten to emphasize, or invent, tableaus of feminine weakness: Elizabeth Hanson's "God's Mercy Surmounting Man's Cruelty" was altered three times by editors from 1728 to 1760 to present her as an increasingly passive and fragile creature "in a poor weak condition" who was "very unfit to endure the hardships" of her captivity.

A defining aspect of this cultural re-engineering was the upending of a gender history that had proved deeply humiliating to men. Time and again, leaders and militias had failed to protect and redeem women and their children. Of female colonists seized in New England and taken to Canada from 1689 to 1730, more than a quarter — and a whopping 60 percent between the ages of 12 and 21 — never came home.

Early American male defenders had suffered the further mortification of hearing female captives (Mary Rowlandson among them) disparage their protective efforts gone awry or, worse, recount how they managed to defend themselves. Rowlandson negotiated shrewdly with her captors and named her own ransom. Hannah Duston, abducted as she lay in bed recovering from childbirth (while her husband fled), escaped after killing a family of Indians with a hatchet and taking their scalps.

In response to this shame, the new model exaggerated iron-clad valor on the part of white men and crinoline helplessness on the part of white women. Thus was born the dime-store melodrama in which manly heroics always save the girl in jeopardy. As the historian Roy Harvey Pearce observed in 1947, the captivity narrative was refashioned into America's "terroristic vehicle," our verbal armor against our oldest national nightmare. That wholesale overhaul would inform the plots of everything from "The Last of the Mohicans" to countless television westerns to Steven Spielberg's post-9/11 drama, "War of the Worlds."

Sept. 11 cracked the plaster on that master narrative of American prowess because it so exactly duplicated the terms of the early Indian wars, right down to the fecklessness of our leaders and the failures of our military strategies. Like its early American antecedents, the 9/11 attack was a homeland incursion against civilian targets by non-European, non-Christian combatants who fought under the flag of no recognized nation. Like the "different type of war" heralded by President Bush, the 17th and 18th century "troubles" — as one Puritan chronicler of Metacom's Rebellion called them, refusing to grant them "the name of a war" — seemed to have no battlefield conventions, no constraints and no end.

Unfortunately, by replicating the Colonial war on terrorism, 9/11 invited us to re-enact the post-Colonial solution, to bury our awareness of our vulnerability under belligerent posturing and comforting fantasy.

Like the cultural imagineers before them, our post-9/11 press, entertainers and political spin doctors set to work to prop up our sense of virile indomitability — "the return of the manly man" and a reconstituted "John Wayne masculinity" were on every media lip, as the triumphs of torture-prone Jack Bauer heroes were on every TV. The 2004 presidential campaign was given a Western stage set — with the candidates proving their ability to assume the mantle of

Crockett in Chief by bragging about their gun collections, hacking at brush and tree stumps and shooting at wild animals. (John Kerry spent so much time in hunting camouflage that he was dubbed "John the Deerslayer.")

Also restored was the defense of helpless femininity. Witness the Bush administration's much-trumpeted claims to be saving Afghan women from their burqas and Iraqi women from Saddam Hussein's "rape rooms." Or the military's much-ballyhooed "rescue" of Pvt. Jessica Lynch (albeit from a hospital whose caregivers had tried to return her to American forces, but had been driven back by American gunfire). Or the invention of a supposedly huge new voting bloc of "security moms," trembling-lipped homemakers desperate to re-elect the sheriff who would keep terrorists from their suburban ranches.

Or "The Hug," the photo op that was turned into the most expensive political ad of the 2004 race, in which President Bush embraced a teenage girl whose mother had died in the World Trade Center. In the commercial, which analysts viewed as the most effective of Mr. Bush's campaign, the girl told voters, "He's the most powerful man in the world, and all he wants to do is make sure I'm safe."

Such reversions have led us in some terrible and self-destructive directions — loss of civil liberties, endorsement of torture and a misbegotten war paramount among them — because they are based on a need to deny, not address, a disturbing national reality. But we shouldn't be so afraid to countenance the ghosts of our Mary Rowlandsons.

The founders of our country were steeped in the experience of Metacom's Rebellion. In the Revolutionary era, Rowlandson herself had a curtain call as an American icon: her book was reissued in the 1770s and once again achieved popularity, along with the narratives of a number of other women who had endured trials in the embattled wilderness. It was in these very times, with recent knowledge of domestic attack, that our founders expanded, not contracted, the concept of democracy, authoring the very liberties we have been tempted to renounce in our own time of "troubles."

If the polls recording widespread disenchantment with the Iraq war and the Bush administration's performance are any indication, we may finally — a half-dozen years after 9/11 — be prepared to ask some hard questions about our response. That suggests we may be at a moment of clarity and, hence, of great possibility. By returning us to the trauma that produced our national myth, the 9/11 attacks present the opportunity to look past the era of buckskin bravado and unlock the cabinet wherein lies America's deepest formative fear, the fear of home-soil terrorism.

One ultimate casualty of Metacom's Rebellion was the Puritans' determination to face that fear. By revisiting our ancient drama, 9/11 gives us a chance to regain that abandoned resolve, to see our frailties in a realistic light, instead of papering them over with dangerous delusions.

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